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WE WILL MAKE YOUR HEAD EXPLODE

by

JACLYN MARIE SULLIVAN
B.A. University of Central Florida, 2006

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
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ABSTRACT

We Will Make Your Head Explode is a collection of short fiction that explore themes of friendship, family, love, lust, jealousy, loyalty, disappointment, and the necessity of moving on. The characters in these stories are utterly human; they are pushed, pulled, and often fall victim to circumstance. A woman grapples between her love of roadside attractions and her boyfriend's grief. A son is forced to decide whether or not to honor his mother's final wishes. A college student is blind to her brother's evolution beyond their family. A woman discovers new possibilities while stalking graveyards to escape the memory of a man who left her behind. A teenager on the run finds—and loses—her first love.

As desperately as they struggle to control their situations, their love lives, their families, and their emotions, they are often faced with simply having to come to terms with their realities. These eleven stories are intended to examine the ways people are capable of treating each other, both good and bad, and how people deal with the inevitability of being forced to move beyond what seems permanent, to create new identities, to laugh, and to learn from their mistakes

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THE WORLD'S SMALLEST HORSE

The sign is right past Mile Marker 55: See The World's Smallest Horse. The billboard is bright orange and showcases a crude painting of a bodiless hand with a Chestnut mare galloping around the palm. I love the idea of a horse so tiny it can fit in a hand. I love it.

"I have to go to the bathroom," I say when the sign has passed. "There's a stop up ahead."

"We don't have time," Philip says. He shifts in his seat, snaps his seatbelt and sets his jaw.

"We have time. You just don't want to stop."

"To see the world's smallest horse? No. I don't want to stop for that."

"I said I have to go to the bathroom."

"You're lying."

"I'm not."

"Rosalind. Stop."

Things have been rocky between Phil and me since his mother passed away. We're on our way to the funeral. I'd never say it to him, but I didn't care for her.

*

I'm not a good passenger. My father used to threaten to leave me at rest stops when I'd beg to stop for Reese's Peanut Butter cups and Dr. Peppers. He says he has no tolerance for

begging, but I always got the impression that he secretly thought my dramatic arguments for why stopping would be a great plan were funny. My mother would pop aspirins and sip out of a decorative flask when we took family trips. I don't know what it is that makes me so restless. A few years ago, my best friend, Merle, and I took a trip up to Jacksonville to see a band play. Really, to see the guys in the band. It was the best time I've ever had in my life. During that trip I turned Merle on to tourist traps. I have a weakness for them. I don't care how ridiculous they sound, I love all of them; The World's Biggest Rocking Chair, See The Horrific Swamp Thing, Head of a Beautiful Girl, Body of a Snake—whatever the road has to offer, I'm on board. I can't resist the promise of a freak show. Merle loves it. Phil doesn't get it. He's no fuss, no muss and I guess we really do make an unusual couple but we've made it work for long enough.

I met Phil at an ice cream shop. He was getting a tall soft serve vanilla in a sugar cone and I made some bad joke about real men and real ice cream. He turned around to see who I was talking to before realizing that the joke was on him. We talked. He didn't even blink when I got mine with sprinkles. Rainbow. He gave me his card.

I should have been tipped off by the fact that he had a card.

And then, here we are, three years later, right past Mile Marker 36 and it looks like I'm going to miss out on The World's Smallest Horse.

*

The first time I met Phil's mom I was wearing a red cocktail dress. I never even thought about the potential repercussions. I bought it on a pretty good sale at Macy's and I liked the way it felt around my thighs. It had gold thread running through the bust. I thought it was pretty

fantastic. When Phil picked me up, he tried hard not to show any expression, but I could see it in his eyes. The dress was a mistake.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. I didn’t want to screw anything up.

“Nothing.”

“Clearly, something is wrong.”

“Well.”

“Well?”

“Well, I just thought you’d wear a black dress or pants. Something not shiny.”

“I’m a happy person, Philip. And everyone likes red.” I smiled, flashed teeth.

“Okay. It’s fine. You look great.”

Of course it wasn’t fine and Phil didn’t warn me. Phil’s mom defined the word severe. It explains a lot about Phil, really. She didn’t hesitate to tell me my dress was inappropriate for dinner. The evening was followed with a series of questions I stumbled to answer followed with withering nods and blinks, finished off with expired creamer in my coffee. She opened a fresh bottle for Philip after topping me off.

Merle and my mother have both warned me against getting involved with a guy who’s too close to his mother, but I have my reasons for being optimistic about us. Phil likes to do dishes, at least more than I do, and he looks good in maroon, which is my favorite color. He’s a good kisser and drinks his gin straight—I like that in a man. There are things about him that remind me of my dad and I know people think that’s weird but it’s in a good way; he’ll always make sure guests have drinks in their hands, for example, and he remembers to put the toilet paper back on the holder instead of leaving it on top of the toilet like other guys do. He’s nice to

little kids but gruff when it comes to business. He grows a good beard and buys streamlined furniture. I like to see the best in people. That's what was so hard about getting to know his mother. There really wasn't much to like other than her contribution of Philip to the world and a quality beef brisket—not at all dry.

We're listening to AM oldies radio in the car. My choice. Philip would just as soon drive in silence but my weakness for oldies radio is only rivaled by my weakness for tourist traps. He's zoned out anyway. Preoccupied. I get it.

We pass the exit for The World's Smallest Horse and I sigh, just a little. All the same, Philip's eyes roll to the back of his head before refocusing on the road. I desperately want him to find this trait of mine endearing. After three years, you would think he'd be able to appreciate these things about me. I think that if I'm persistent, the roadside attraction thing will grow on him, just like AM radio.

The first time I introduced Phil to my parents was at the county fair, where I planned to run into them. Phil was wearing a short sleeve button down shirt in an ocean-water blue that I picked out for him and encouraged him to buy. I liked the way the blue looked with the gold in his hair and his beard. He trimmed his beard short that day, shorter than I liked it. He kept it short most of the time, when he didn't shave it off entirely, which happened sometimes. My parents were sharing a funnel cake when they met us in front of the Ferris wheel, just like we planned. I told Phil we'd be meeting them there and if he was nervous at all he didn't show it. He shook my father's hand firmly and hugged my mother gently. They talked about what a rip-off carnival games are while I smiled and picked off sections of funnel cake and enjoyed the moment.

*

The wake is at 6:30. We're already dressed just in case we don't have time to stop at the hotel. The heat is too much. It's almost making me cranky. Philip is already there. We stop at a Waffle House and he complains about the ball of butter on his waffle, about its crunchiness, about the carbonation in his soda. He sucks his breath when the waitress says it's cash only and I stroke his knee under the table.

"I have cash. We're okay."

I'm trying to be gentle with Phil. I realize that he and his mother were close and to me it's not a problem for a man to be close to his mother. It's endearing. Men who are nice to their mothers and sisters tend to make good husbands, I hear. Merle thinks now that his mother is dead he'll finally propose. She's the one who said "finally." I've been patient. I'm in no rush. I get it; I appreciate his desire to take it slow, to not rush. He's not a rushing kind of person.

When Phil got the call about his mother, I did what made sense. I took extra care when making the bed because I know he likes that. I took the laundry out of the dryer right when the buzzer went off so that the clothes wouldn't wrinkle and I put everything on hangers. I made a fresh pitcher of sweet tea and I baked a key lime pie, his favorite, with real key limes I got from the farmer's market.

I baked a key lime pie.

We've been driving for a little over six hours and I start to worry that Philip will fall asleep behind the wheel if we don't start talking. He's still upset about the waffles and maybe a little bit about The World's Smallest Horse, too. Gladys Knight and The Pips sing for us from crackly speakers. I think we're losing the station.

“I always forget how long Florida is.”

“Mmmhmm.”

“It just takes forever to get out of here. I drove to New Orleans once and it took damn near thirteen hours.”

“You’ve told me.”

“Yeah, that was a fun trip, though. I’ve never walked so much in my life.”

“Ros, please.”

“What?”

“I’m just not in the mood to talk. My mother is dead.” He turns the radio up and then fiddles with the tuner until he finds a clearer signal. He glances at me sideways to see if I can be satisfied with Norman Greenbaum and I suppose I am.

*

My parents are meeting up with us for the funeral and we have breakfast plans for the following day. I think it’s very good of them to come to support Phil. They like him well enough, more than they liked some of the guys I dated before him. My dad thinks he needs to loosen up; my mom thinks he’s just not used to being in a relationship. We arrive just early enough for Phil to join his brother, Mark, at the altar without people whispering. I sit with my parents, to the left of my mom. She presses her face against mine and winks. I told her I was going to wear red underwear under my black dress as a tribute to Phil’s mom. I couldn’t help it.

The funeral itself is pretty great. I wouldn’t mind one like it for myself, someday. The hors d’oeuvres are tasty and the wine is flowing; there are no gardenias so I’m pretty happy overall. Philip gets busy grieving and thanking people for coming. I stand by him until it’s

apparent he doesn't need me anymore and I join my parents by the crudités. They ordered a nice spread, Phil and Mark, and I'm impressed—brie and raspberry preserves in puff pastry, antipasto, beautiful steamy pans of lasagna, marked vegetarian and meaty, and baskets of fresh garlic bread. The food is not what their mother would have prepared or paid for. I wonder if Mark's wife had a say in it, or if she planned the whole thing herself, regardless of what they wanted. She's that way. I wonder what her relationship with their mother was like. My dad is sniffing the ranch dressing and a bit gets in his mustache. My mom dabs at his face with a napkin and he wrinkles his nose.

My parents are adorable together—thirty-five years of marriage. I wonder how many napkins my mother has dabbed at my father's face and how many times he's wrinkled his nose at her with that same smile.

"How was your drive, Ros?" my dad asks.

"Hot. Black dresses are not road trip appropriate."

"Well, they're funeral appropriate, honey," my mom says. She's holding a chocolate truffle up to the light, as if it will help her see what's in the middle.

"Yeah, but it's too hot. When I die, I want people to wear whatever they want."

"Rosalind, don't talk about dying, it isn't nice."

"Mom, it's chocolate. It's going to taste good no matter what. There could be a bug in there and the outside is still going to taste good."

"Well, you know."

"What do I know?"

"Oh, you know. Don't be a pest."

This is typical. I laugh and my parents do too. Then I remember that laughing at your boyfriend's mother's funeral might be frowned upon, particularly by said dead mother. I tip my glass back.

"Did you guys pass the billboard for The World's Smallest Horse?" I ask them.

My father chuckles. He's a chuckling kind of guy.

"Your mother pointed it out. She said you'd want to stop."

"I did! Remember when I told you about the trip Merle and I took when we stopped at about five of those things?"

"And spent at least thirty dollars doing it."

"Yeah, but it was fun. We had a good time."

"How is Merle?" my mother asked.

"She's okay. Living it up in Virginia. She's dating some guy who's going to be a doctor."

"It's nice that she got into that school she wanted to go to."

"It is nice. I miss her."

"You could always go visit her."

"Yeah, but now with Phil's mom it's just not a good time. I don't know when he'll be back to normal."

My parents exchange a look I don't like and I don't ask them what it means. I know. Phil and I have a good thing though. I don't want to ruin it.

"Anyway, Phil didn't think we'd have time to stop for it. I really want to see it on the way home though."

“Mmmhmm,” my mother says.

Phil comes up behind me and rests his hand on the small of my back. My parents aren’t like his mother and they don’t mind this. They probably don’t even notice. He never would have done that in front of her, I know.

“Thank you both for coming,” he says, shaking my father’s hand. My mother takes him into a light hug and kisses his forehead.

“Of course we came,” she says.

“How was your drive?” he asks.

“Good, good.” My father coughs. “Rosalind said you kids missed The World’s Smallest Horse. She’s just heartbroken about it.”

Phil chokes out a laugh and takes a sip of gin.

“Well, we needed to be sure to be here on time. Mark would have burned me alive if I had been late. Maybe we’ll catch it on the way back.”

“That would be really nice,” my mother says.

*

It’s nine o’clock in the morning and we’ve checked out of the hotel, had breakfast at Denny’s (paid with plastic) and are back on the road. Mile Marker 76 going east advertises The World’s Smallest Horse at Mile Marker 55. I cross my legs and wiggle my eyebrows. We’re listening to NPR because we’re out of range of any AM oldies.

“Rosalind, I really just want to get home. We had a long day yesterday.”

“I know, but it would be fun. I think we could use some fun.”

“Ros, my mother is dead.”

“I think it would be nice for you to have a distraction.”

He doesn't respond. I pause. I have to play my cards right here. He's in a bad way and I really want to see The World's Smallest Horse.

“Phil, I know you won't believe me, but I'll miss her too. I really will. I know we didn't really get along but she did give birth to you and raised you and I can't help but be sentimental about that. You know how I am.”

Phil smiles a little, just a little, and he sighs.

“I really want to get home.”

I give up. I curl my legs to my chest and close my eyes. Click and Clack are rambling on about cars on the radio and I've lost interest.

“Okay,” I say, and I mean it. I do.

Phil shakes me awake right when I start dreaming. It's an abrupt awakening and I can't place who or what was going to be in the dream. I rub my eyes and shake my head to get my bearings.

The World's Smallest Horse's stable is right in front of us. We're parked in a dusty lot with room for three more cars. A wooden sign advertising \$3 to see The World's Smallest Horse is directly in my line of vision. I smile and grip Phil's hand.

“It better be good,” Phil says.

I smile at him again and unbuckle my seat belt. I can't wait to see it.

An old man, really old, with liver spots on the top of his shiny head and silver-tipped copper hair around the edges smiles a mouthful of yellowy teeth at me. He lets his fingers brush mine as I hand him a five and a single. Phil takes my hand and we walk up to the gate.

A miniature horse, maybe thirty inches off the ground, sleepily munches on some hay. He has a blond mane and brown spots on his miniature beige body. A sign says his name is Rosebud. He doesn't look at us or appear to care about us at all. An Indian family is on the other side looking at the horse, a little Indian boy and a little Indian girl clapping at the sight of the mini horse. The mother of the children smiles at me and I smile back at her. I hear the old man telling another interested party outside that they need to pay three dollars each if they want to see the horse.

The animal lets out a little whinny, presumably for the benefit of the children. He's good. Really good. The kids can barely take the thrill. I laugh at their excitement and envy it. I turn to look at Phil. His face is red, mottled. I feel my heart beat into my throat.

"What's wrong?" I say.

"Rosalind. It's a Shetland pony."

"Yeah, not quite small enough to fit in your hand, but he's still pretty cute, isn't he? Did you see those kids?"

"Rosalind. It's a fucking Shetland pony."

Phil turns and walks out of the stable. The children didn't seem to hear, but their mother glares at me, for Phil's language, I guess. I mouth "I'm sorry" to her and leave the horse and the children and the yellow-toothed man.

I walk back to the car slowly and calculate how long it will take us to get home from the stop. I wonder if the attraction has a restroom I could use and I consider running back to check so I won't have to ask Philip to stop for the rest of the drive. But I can't go back. I can't go back and look at that mother and her children enjoying The World's Smallest Horse without me.

Philip sits in the car, letting the engine idle. The radio is off, the air conditioner off, and his eyes are closed, brow furrowed, jaw set. He starts the car when I open the door and allows me the time to put my seatbelt on before he peels out. I hate the smell of tire smoke.

We get all the way to Mile Marker 27 before he finally says something to me, head shaking, and mouth twisted ugly as he reiterates my wrong.

"A fucking Shetland pony."

JANUARY-DECEMBER

She's the kind of girl who doesn't bother using an umbrella. I hate that.

She took up knitting as a hobby. Now she knits everyone scarves for Christmas. We live in Florida.

She has red angry feet. She shoves them into shoes that are clearly too tight and then airs them out at night. They smell like old popcorn.

January-December acts like she's different, like she's cute. Just because her parents gave her a stupid name like that doesn't mean anything. At least not to me.

Robert thinks she's something. I get sick of hearing it, to be honest. We've been together for over a year now. We're engaged. And that girl; she can't mind her own business. Every time we have the littlest fight, over the stupidest thing, Robert goes to January-December for advice. And then I have to hear, "Well, January said," "January thinks," "January wants," followed by brilliant words of wisdom January-damn-December had to say. It's never worth anything. He wants her to be one of my bridesmaids because he says if she were a guy she'd be a groomsman.

He's dreaming.

On Saturdays we get together as a group to play games. Board games, usually. The guys bring beer and I usually run around until the last minute trying to throw together a batch of brownies or peanut butter cookies or whatever while sweeping the floor and shoving dirty dishes

into the dishwasher before people show up. January-December didn't always come to game nights. She recently started dating one of the guys in the group. I should be happy, I guess. Before, she was just Robert's long-time friend. Long-time female friend. Who butts in too much. Now she's someone else's girlfriend. All that means to me is that she's around more and with a better excuse now. Being a girlfriend hasn't stopped her from paying too much attention to my fiancé.

Tonight, we're playing Scrabble. Simple, fun, good for groups. I'm good at Scrabble. I'm glad we're not playing Mouse Trap. Mouse Trap is one of those games that seems fun when you're looking at the box and maybe even when you're looking at the directions, but then you remember you have to build the trap as you play the game and everyone gets really impatient and just wants to watch the little man jump into the cup so that the trap will fall and catch all the mice. Scrabble has simplicity on its side.

January-December always shows up just a little too early for comfort. At least for my comfort. Robert doesn't even blink when she knocks before he's finished getting dressed. He'll answer the door with no shirt on. Not even kidding. Like tonight, for example; I'm pulling lemon bars out of the fridge and I'm making sure the Brita pitcher is filled and on its way to being chilled and when I hear that knock I freeze. I know I can wipe my hands on a towel, answer it—but Robert strolls out of the bedroom, shirtless, belt unbuckled and reaches for the doorknob.

"You could finish getting dressed," I say.

"It's probably just January," he answers, smiling at the door.

She clasps his hand as she enters my apartment, already laughing along with him like she already told the joke on the other side. Unable to contain herself. Knowing the laughs are already going to be a plenty.

“Ladies, if you’ll excuse me,” Robert says, gesturing to his crotch with one hand, looping his belt with the other. “I’m sure you can entertain each other.”

Doubtful.

January-December always annoyed me—something about the way she and Robert are so comfortable with each other sits with me like sour milk. I’m not worried about him cheating. I have a friend who had an affair with a married guy and she told me that if I felt worried in my gut to trust it. Her boyfriend’s wife confronted her several times and she lied to her face, over and over again, but it didn’t matter. That girl knew. My guts aren’t worried though. Robert isn’t attracted to January-December in that way, not that I’ve ever seen, at least. I just hate how much they talk. I hate that they talk about me. I hate the familiarity between them.

“We’re like brother and sister,” he said to me once.

I don’t get that.

Other people arrive and the guys have already knocked down a six-pack of Pabst. I don’t bother drinking beer, but January-December does. Of course she does. My friend Liz and I sip wine and keep close watch on the cookies she brought. We both know we can’t eat too many until everyone else has already had at least one. We’ve become very good at non-verbal communication, especially since January-December infiltrated. It was a shame when she started

seeing Charley. Liz thought she had something with him and I did too—we all did. Then out of nowhere, out of the damn clear blue sky, that girl swooped in and was in a full-blown relationship with a guy we didn't even realize she really knew. I should be glad, I know. It hasn't helped though, like I said. Now she's just found more reasons to show up where we are.

Seven of us are playing tonight, which makes for a long drawn out game of Scrabble. Charley got a B during the draw, so he goes first. He plays JUNK. Fifteen points, plus the first player bonus, so he gets 30. January-December's beer is sweating onto my table, leaving a ring, and it's a little low. I force myself to concentrate on my letters. They're garbage. AEIOSNP. I could do PINES. PANKS. Is PANK a word? PINK. SPANK.

January-December bites her lip and studies her letters. Her drink sweat has spread and the end of the Scrabble directions is sopping the liquid up. The paper will dry and wrinkle and I bet a few words will smear. I look at Liz and she's looking at me. I know what she's thinking. She knows what I'm thinking.

"Hey," Liz says, "I want to use a coaster." She says it loudly, announces it like she's excited. Like it's the best idea anyone has ever had.

"Oh yeah," I say. "Everyone should use coasters. Coasters make the world a better place."

Liz gets up and sends me a brain wave. "Come." I get up to follow her to the kitchen.

Robert is oblivious. He chews a bit of lemon bar and swishes the beer around his mouth. Lemon bar and beer—a winning combination. He's staring at his letters with two big wrinkles in his forehead. I loved those wrinkles until he started using my Clinique under eye cream on his

face because January-December told him it could help slow the aging process. Seriously. She notices his forehead wrinkles.

“Kim,” Liz says when we’re away from the rest of them. She’s huddled near the refrigerator. The music Robert put on when people started arriving is loud enough that no one should be able to eavesdrop. I think.

“Hey, what’s going on?” I ask her. I don’t like the look on her face.

“I tried to call you before I came,” she says. “You didn’t answer.”

“Sorry?” I say. “What’s wrong?”

“Ugh, I don’t want to tell you,” she says. She does stuff like that.

“Well, now you have to tell me,” I say. “You have to, and hurry. I don’t want them to get suspicious.”

Her face is pained. She fidgets with the top button of her jacket.

“So, I was talking to Molly last night,” she says. Molly is an acquaintance of Robert and January-December’s and the rest of that group that went to high school together. She doesn’t hang out often, but she pops up here and there.

“Where were you talking to her?” I ask.

“Online. So listen, we were talking about I don’t even remember what. Like, dieting or something. And I don’t know how it came up.”

“How what came up?”

“She told me that when they were all young, like in eleventh grade or something, Robert and that bitch kissed.”

“Kissed? He kissed January-December?”

“Yeah, just kissed. She said as far as she knew nothing else happened. It was at a party they were all at or something. She wasn’t telling me to be sneaky, I don’t even know how it came up, I said something to her about Charley and how I kind of liked him but that he and January-December seem really into each other, and then she said something about how January-December always bounces around from guy to guy and not to worry, she’d move on quickly enough, and then that came up. I wanted to tell you before everyone came over tonight, but you didn’t answer.” The worry lines around her eyes are visible.

“They kissed? Why didn’t he ever tell me?” My stomach becomes jelly.

“Ugh, I should have waited to tell you. I shouldn’t have told you while they’re all right here.”

“Kim?” Robert yells from the living room. “What are you guys doing in there? Stop gossiping and come back.”

“Coming!” Liz yells back. My throat is sandpaper. She grabs the coasters from the counter and pulls on my arm.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “We’ll talk about it more later.” She tugs my arm again and I move.

We sit back down in our spots and Liz slides coasters under the closest drinks. She shoves the last one toward January-December who doesn’t notice. She’s fidgeting with her phone, crooked smile and head tilt intact, while Charley rubs her upper thigh. Liz rolls her eyes, then locks me in a stare. “Keep it together,” her brain says.

“January, your turn,” Robert says. I hate how he calls her January. I hate it. Everyone else calls her January-December. Everyone. She insists on it. Only Robert can call her January without a passive-aggressive, bullshitty, “Sorry, but it’s actually January-December,” and a giggle.

She tilts her head and rearranges a few tiles. She opens her mouth to say something, but I interrupt.

“Why did your parents name you that?”

“Hmm?”

“Why did your parents give you a name like January-December?”

I don’t look at Robert or Liz, or January-December for that matter. I’m looking at my Scrabble tiles. The letter “S” turns into a snake and slithers down the table and it crawls on my ring finger, on my engagement ring, up my hand and wraps itself around my wrist. It holds tight while I wait for an answer.

She laughs. Tilts her head the other way. Robert is frowning, I can see out of the corner of my eye. Liz is sending me brain waves. Abort. Abort.

“Why do you ask?”

“I’m just curious.”

Charley laughs too loudly, his hand still creeping around her thigh. He has lemon bar in his beard.

“Her parents weren’t sure if she was conceived in January or December so they named her both!”

January-December joins Charley in his laughter and Robert's frown turns into a smirk. He's glad Charley stood up for her. He shifts his body away from me and his belt buckle faces her now. Liz is going to burst. She drains wine into her face to silence herself.

"Anyways," January-December says. I bite my tongue. It's "Anyway." Any fool knows that. Fool. Slut.

"KINGDOMS." She says it out loud. We can all see. Bingo bonus. On the triple word score. 104 points.

She must have planned that. She must have picked through the bag when no one was looking. Liz and I were up and those guys wouldn't even notice. Maybe they all picked through the bag. Maybe she suggested it.

"Your turn," she says to me, smiling sweetly. Robert pens her 104 points on the score sheet, which I'm supposed to be keeping, but I'm not.

"Good luck beating that, everyone," Robert says.

Silence. Only for a moment.

I play PAINS. Ten points.

Head tilt.

Liz stifles a smile.

When Robert and I first started dating, he mentioned January-December here and there, in passing, no more often than he mentioned Charley or Jeff, or even his brother. I have friends who are guys from before I met him, and it's perfectly fine. They don't hang out. I don't tell them our personal business. I talk to Liz about that stuff. When I see them, we're always in a

group. Things change when you're in a real relationship; you don't just keep on being friends with people of the opposite sex the same way. January-December didn't get the memo.

January-December's head is tilting so far I wonder if it will just fall right off and roll under the couch. I have a broom handy for when cat toys get under there. I'll rescue it and be the heroine for the night. Or maybe I'll leave it under there and let it collect dander and dust bunnies and crumbs. It amazes me that guys fall for that head tilt. Charley stares at January-December like Liz isn't sitting right there, and I feel like slapping him. I don't understand what he sees in the bitch.

We go around again and January-December snags another triple word score, which is absolutely absurd. Charley keeps leaving them open for her. She's over 100 points ahead of all of us. Liz has the second highest score. I'm not even trying anymore.

"Your turn, babe," Robert says. He gets up to get another beer. "Anyone else need one?"

"I'll take one, Rob," January-December says. No one calls him Rob. His own mother doesn't call him Rob.

At our engagement party, January-December sat with his mother, gushing and laughing for the better part of the party. She kept refilling her drinks and talked to her about the two of them when they were young. I watched from every angle. There were at least three hugs and a warm handclasp. It infuriated me. My mom told me to relax.

"He's marrying you, sweetheart," she said. "Jealousy won't get you anywhere."

“I’m not jealous of her,” I said. “She freaking sucks. But look at her there, with his mother. She’s my mother-in-law. I should be laughing with her and talking about Robert when he was a kid.”

“So go over there and do it,” she said.

“I wouldn’t want to interrupt.” I turned my back to them.

“Maybe you should try to be nice,” she said.

“I am nice. She’s the one who isn’t nice. She always has to be better than me.”

“Well, you know I think you’re better than her,” my mom said. “You’re the best.”

“I would hope you think that. At least someone does.”

Robert comes back to the table with drinks for himself and for January-December. My wine glass is empty. Liz has one eye on my glass and one on Charley. Her leg shakes. It’s a nervous habit of hers. I’ll have to remind her that he’s not worth it later. He’s on unemployment. He plays video games all day. That’s fine for January-December, but Liz can do better. Fucking January-December. I look from her to Robert. They don’t even look good together. Maybe I should call her out right here in front of everyone. But what would that do? What would I say? “So, you two kissed ten years ago and never thought to tell me?” Robert would be furious. January-December would probably like the memory. “Oh yes, Kim. I taught him everything he knows. You can thank me whenever.” Giggle. Head tilt.

Kissed. *What kind of kiss?* I should have asked Liz. I look at Robert’s mouth, then January-December’s. A kiss? A little kiss? That’s not the worst thing. What’s a kiss? An

insignificant bumping of lips—a chocolate teardrop—a Prince song? Or was it a *kiss*? I need to know.

“It was ten years ago,” Liz’s brain says to mine. “Don’t freak out yet. Not right now.”

“Still your turn, Kim,” Robert says.

I keep my eyes on my tiles. The board is crowded in an ugly way. All of the letters are too close for comfort, a jumbled alphabet soup. I’m having a hard time concentrating.

“We should put a timer on the turns, maybe,” January-December says airily.

“Thanks for the suggestion,” I say. I throw letters down quickly, jumbling the soup even more. WEIRD.

January-December is freaking weird.

“How many points is that?” I ask.

“None, because you spelled it wrong,” January-December says. “Go ahead and try again, I’m not going to challenge it.”

I look at the board. I put WIERD, by accident. It was a mistake.

Robert laughs, and Jeff and Charley join in. January-December starts laughing gently, but Robert roars with it, which makes me angrier. She might as well just join everyone else and cut it up.

Liz tries to help.

“C’mon guys,” she says. “That’s not even that funny, I think I did the same thing one time and just didn’t admit it and no one noticed. Let’s keep going. It’s your turn, Jeff.”

“Might have to give that Master’s degree back, Kim,” Robert says.

“I can’t go until Kim fixes her word,” Jeff says.

Liz gives me warning eyes. “Don’t blow up. Don’t let her win,” her brain waves insist. “Don’t do it.”

I try to blink back my tears. I know my face is red, but no one is paying attention to me anyway.

“I’ll skip my turn,” I say.

“You know, Kim,” January-December says. “When you skip turns you give up any chance you have of winning the game. It’s better to just play a little word and get rid of some letters than to skip the opportunity to get points at all.”

“I know how to play the game,” I say.

“I know, I’m just trying to help,” she says and smiles. Head tilt.

“Yeah, Kim, chill out. She’s just being nice,” Robert says.

Liz shakes her head a little and reaches for a cookie. January-December hasn’t touched the cookies or the lemon bars. She brought peanut brittle to our Christmas party in December and had a package wrapped up special just for Robert.

“It’s his favorite,” she said. “I’ve been making it for him since we were teenagers.”

He ate the peanut brittle after dinner every night for a week. I’m allergic to peanuts.

My whole face is on fire. I make eye contact with Liz. “Be nice,” her brain says. “You can’t do anything else right this second.” I nod at her; she’s right, and I should try to be nice.

“January’s going to win the game anyway,” I say. “Since she got that awesome first play.”

Liz closes her eyes and slowly puts a hand to her forehead. Jeff and Charley don't notice. January-December smiles and tilts her head. I want to grab it and straighten it out for her. She's like a little kid who won't look straight into the camera for a school picture. I can't take it.

"Kim, come on," Robert says. "You know she prefers to be called January-December."

January-December smiles at him.

"It's true," she says. "I do prefer that. Rob knows."

She gets the last triple word score and wins the game.

FISH DON'T HAVE FEELINGS

He was slick about it.

Slick was the word my father would have used. The morning after, while I pretended to be asleep in Tim's bed, I just kept thinking it. Slick. Slick, like a raincoat—a rain-slicker. Slick, like a snake slithering between feet. Slick, like two unfamiliar bodies familiarizing in a dark, hot room on a too-small bed with dirtyish sheets.

Slick always tended to work on me.

We ran into each other fifteen years after our high school graduation, five years after the reunion neither of us attended. I'd considered going, and was coaxed to by my mother and my best friend, Sandra, who was thrilled to have the opportunity to look at the faces and the bodies of the people we bumped around with all those years ago. I'd kept in touch with everyone I cared to still know and I didn't see the point in sharing watered-down drinks and hot wings at an old Hard Rock Café with people who weren't worth keeping in touch with.

"You just don't want to go alone. But we can go together," Sandra said.

"Yeah, with you and Jason. Sounds great. 'Hi everyone. Remember us? Sandra and Julie and Sandra's husband who didn't go to school with us and take note, everyone, Tagalong Julie's still alone!"

"You're not a tagalong. And who cares? No one will care. It's not like everyone is going to be married."

"I'm not interested."

When I saw Tim at Starbucks during a holiday visit to my parents' house the next year, I'd tried to avoid him. I hate running into people I know from home. I hate that I still call my parents' house and the city I'm from home. Sandra doesn't get it. She still says "home" too, when she visits, but she has her own home that she bought with her husband, and she has a king-sized bed and wedding china and a new last name, a new identity, a new future with someone outside of what I know.

I rent.

I was only at Starbucks to get good coffee beans for my mother's Christmas brunch. She's embarrassed to serve Folgers to guests, even if the guests are family members. I volunteered to get the "nice" beans.

Driving the familiar roads felt odd to me. I expected to forget the way, to get confused by a new Burger King on the corner of a road that used to house a Bank of America or a Pizza Hut, and to end up in a neighborhood that I didn't recognize, but it never happened that way. I pulled into the Starbucks parking lot slowly, stopping for a trio of ugly black and white ducks, the ones exclusive to South Florida, their faces mottled with vibrant red tumors, outcasts confined to paved parking lots and man-made canals. The ducks were entitled in their ugliness, slow moving and fat from too many gifts of broken cookies and bread from well-intentioned children. I parked crooked, decided against straightening out, and passed a group of smoking teenagers sitting under an umbrella table in the front. More and more frequently, I felt the urge to warn teenagers when I saw them doing things I wished I'd never done. I'd recently commanded a middle school aged boy to pull his pants up while leaving Target with Sandra and I was surprised when he obeyed without a word.

I picked a bag of Columbian roast and waited in line to pay. I saw Tim enter and for a moment, couldn't place how I knew him. His name was absent from my tongue, but I recognized his features, though not exactly, because they were older than I'd remembered them. He wore a black button up shirt, loose blue jeans, and sunglasses on his head, intentional lazy casualness. I'd dated men like him before; ones who tried to look like they weren't trying. I knew the look.

When we made eye contact, his name and who he was came flooding back, and I looked away. I hoped he wouldn't make an effort, that he would just let it go unspoken. We hadn't been friends in high school, just acquaintances. He'd dated a casual friend of mine, a girl I sat next to in English and complained to about homework and with whom I'd talked to about dieting, but nothing else. There was no need for a mini-reunion in a Starbucks three days before Christmas fifteen years later, and I hoped he'd respect that.

"Julie? Is that you?"

I could have pretended that I wasn't myself. I could have pretended to be confused, or that I just didn't remember him; I could have pretended that I didn't even speak English. ¿No hablo Inglés? But it was too late.

"Hey, Tim, is that you? I hardly recognized you, it's been so long," I said without meaning.

He insisted on paying for my Columbian roast, and bought me a cup of Café Americano to go with his. We sat outside, near the teenagers and the ducks, and played catch-up, even though we'd never been caught up with one another.

Sandra couldn't believe it.

"What's he like? What does he do now? Is he still cute?"

"I don't know. I guess so. I don't remember thinking he was cute in high school," I said.

"He was."

"Ugh, I feel weird talking about this."

"Why? What's the big deal?"

"We were never friends with him."

"So? That doesn't mean I'm not curious. Please don't hold out on me."

I love Sandra because she loves to know everything about everyone, even people she doesn't really know or care about. That I'm generally unobservant annoys her to no end.

"I have too much stuff in my brain to remember what someone was wearing, or looked like, or said," I told her once.

She was unrelenting though. I was embarrassed to admit that not only had I spent the better part of the afternoon listening to Tim tell me about his life and telling him about mine, but that I'd given him my number at his request and that I'd agreed to have dinner with him after the holidays died down—which meant I was extending my stay in South Florida for an extra two days.

"You're kidding me, aren't you?" Sandra said when I told her.

"No, but it's no big deal," I said.

"You're kidding me! He must still be cute!" she said.

"Ugh, you're killing me," I said.

"You better tell me what happens!"

“I will.”

“Don’t let him be a jerk.”

I couldn’t remember the food, but I remembered going back to his place. It was mannish, with only the essentials—a bed, a dresser, an old leather couch, a big TV, a coffee table, a microwave and refrigerator, and it was messy, like a college boy’s dorm room. It smelled like a man. Single men’s places always have that distinctive man smell: sweaty, rumpled, with hints of deodorant and cooked meat, sometimes mixed in with marijuana or nicotine, or both. We’d stumbled up the stairs and into his apartment tipsy. I was impressed with myself for making it up the stairs in heels without falling. I wondered if he’d noticed. He put the TV on and poured glasses of wine. I was surprised that he had wine.

Forrest Gump was on TV, on a cable channel. I was suddenly shy, coquettish, as I’d been with men when I was younger, in my late teens and early twenties. I’d been in this position before, on one end of a sofa with a guy on the other side inching closer and closer to me, pretending to be completely engrossed in the movie but barely hearing a word of dialogue. It wasn’t déjà vu—I don’t believe in déjà vu, because I’ve never experienced it. It was just a familiar scene, a familiar setting, and I was the same as I’d ever been. If I thought about it, I hadn’t changed very much from my college-aged self at all. I looked older, and lived alone, instead of in a shared dorm or apartment with Sandra, and I worked hard at a job instead of working hard at school, but I was virtually unchanged. I wasn’t married, like so many of my friends had become, and I hadn’t become a mother like some of them were starting to become, or

were trying to become; I hadn't even given those things much thought because they seemed so far away.

Tim waited until Forrest had already been through a lot, well after Jenny told him that he couldn't keep trying to rescue her, but before he told Jenny that even though he wasn't a smart man, he knew what love was. The glow from the TV danced across our faces and darkened as Tim's moved over mine.

On the plane back to Atlanta I kept thinking about the moment, replaying it, like I used to do when I was younger and had first kisses with guys I'd met in class or at cheap bars Sandra and I'd gotten dressed up to go to for attention. I considered not even telling her. Since she'd gotten married I'd felt like telling her about new men, new sex, new experiences, was somehow unimportant and juvenile, since she'd never have those kinds of stories to share in return. What she had was better. I couldn't keep it from her though.

"He's smooth," she said.

"You think so?" I said.

"Oh yeah, are you kidding? *Forrest Gump*? Are you kidding? It's all Buffalo Springfield and JFK footage and let the love flow. It's a perfect first date movie."

"It was just on TV," I said.

"Yeah, he's smooth."

"My dad would say 'slick.' He always calls people 'slick.' Like gangsters."

"I bet you didn't even make it until the end of the movie."

We hadn't.

He called frequently, mostly late at night, and we giggled into the phone like teenagers, talked dirty, laughed at old memories that we had completely separate accounts of, since we hadn't been friends in high school, but members of the same social group. He ended our calls abruptly, saying that it was too hard to be so far away and that he couldn't stand drawn out good-byes.

"When's he coming to visit?" Sandra asked during our weekly dinner together.

"Next weekend. He's driving."

"That's a long drive," she said.

"We used to make that drive every year," I said.

"Yeah, when we were 20 years old," she said. "Before we sucked it up and started buying plane tickets."

We used to make those 11-hour drives together every Thanksgiving and Christmas. Our parents were glad we'd gone away to college together and had each other to lean on. Sandra met Jason, an Atlanta native, at school, and I stayed for lack of somewhere better to go. Our road trips through Florida were always better than the actual visits home had been. We'd finish our sodas and Cheetos before making it to the Georgia-Florida border, and we'd listen to CD mixes we'd made for the trip, surprising each other with song choices, laughing hysterically one minute, becoming engrossed in serious conversation the next. I missed those trips, even though I didn't think I had the patience to sit in the car for 11 hours anymore. I regretted that our friendship had evolved from those trips and everything else to playing catch up when possible.

But I knew I wouldn't be complaining if I were the one who had fallen in love and gotten married.

"It's been long enough. You guys have been talking on the phone for what? Three months now. And he's just coming to visit?"

"About two and a half months. He works and so do I."

"How long is he staying for?" Sandra asked.

"Just the weekend. He has to work."

"That's a really short trip for such a long drive."

"We're going to the fair."

"That'll be fun," she said.

"Yeah."

I hesitated telling Sandra that I was pregnant before I told Tim. I wanted to tell him in person, so I was relieved when he agreed to come for the weekend.

"Listen," I said to her, "I need to tell you something."

"What?" She leaned forward, suddenly fascinated. She loves secrets.

"You can't freak out."

"I won't freak out. You know I won't freak out."

"You might."

"I won't!"

"Okay." I hesitated. I wondered if my having a baby would prompt her to want one. Maybe we could do it together. "I'm pregnant," I said.

Sandra blinked several times, like sand got in her eye. Her mouth hung open a little and her cheeks flushed. I waited.

“You’re pregnant?” she said.

“Yep.”

“From that one time?”

“Yeah.”

“You didn’t use a condom?”

“We did, but it fell off.”

“It fell off?”

“Yeah, it fell off. I didn’t notice until it was too late.”

The waitress came by with new drinks for us. I smiled and thanked her, and pulled the straw from my empty Diet Coke glass to put into the new one. Sandra just stared at me.

“Julie,” she started; “what are you going to do?”

“What do you mean what am I going to do? I’m going to have it. I’m telling Tim this weekend.”

“What if he doesn’t want it?” she said.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “He’ll want it. Things have been really good. We’ve been talking every day, or almost every day, since I left. He’s driving here to see me.”

“You guys barely know each other.”

“We’ve known him for over ten years,” I said. I suddenly felt self-conscious of the caffeine and artificial sweetener in the soda and wished for a glass of water, wished for the

waitress to come back and ask us if we needed anything else, wished that I just hadn't said anything at all.

Sandra was calculating. I could see her trying to decide what to say next, her brain moving a million miles a minute, trying to simplify the situation.

"Julie," she said. "You don't really know him. I know you're lonely, but you need to think about this."

"I'm not lonely," I said; "I was hoping you'd be excited. I was hoping you'd say you want a baby too."

Her face softened. She reached across the table and took my hand.

"I do want to have a baby, I just don't know when. I want to be married for a little while first, you know?" she said.

I nodded, even though I didn't.

Tim arrived late on Friday night. My conversation with Sandra had made me feel less sure about telling him about the baby. I wasn't showing yet. I didn't know when I'd start to show. His eyes were rimmed with red, casualties of too many hours watching the road and too much McDonalds' coffee. He wrapped me in a hug and lifted me off the ground.

"I'm so glad to see you," he said.

"Me too," I said.

"You're so glad to see you too?"

I swatted at him and led him inside. I'd cleaned meticulously for him. I made sure I had fresh flowers and a full fridge. I'd gotten a reed diffuser and I dusted everywhere, even the tops

of the fans, which had been coated in thick dust that I'd never noticed before. I wanted him to see how well he could live with me.

We fell into bed together as we had the first time, comfortably and fluidly. I fell asleep curled against him, a film of sweat slick between the curves of our bodies.

"You're quiet," Tim said over the pancakes I'd made for breakfast before the fair.

"Just thinking," I said. I was trying to catch the perfect moment to tell him about the baby.

"Thinking about what?"

"Just stuff," I said. I felt like puking for the first time since I'd taken the pregnancy test. I'd washed it off and kept it wrapped up in pantyhose in a bathroom drawer. I felt like throwing it in the trash would be bad luck.

"Well, I'd like to hear your stuff," he said, smiling. He took a sip of his coffee and wiggled his eyebrows at me. I studied his hands. They were big. He had long fingers and dark hair up to his knuckles. Manly hands. I liked them.

"Oh, you'll hear all about my stuff," I said. "I wish you were staying longer."

"I know," he said, suddenly looking at his coffee, "I can't really take time off from work right now, though."

"I know."

"Hey, I'll win you a fish at the carnival today. You can put it in a bowl and keep it right here, and you can think of me every time you look at it."

"Ha, I don't need a fish," I said.

“Okay,” he said, and smiled.

We held hands in the car on the way to the fair and he insisted on paying for our tickets. Everywhere I looked, women and men carted children and babies around. I saw a largely pregnant woman sharing cotton candy with her husband. Her wedding band glinted in the sun and she held one hand on her bulging stomach; it looked hugely uncomfortable. I put a hand on my own stomach and linked my other hand in Tim’s.

We got on the Ferris wheel. I’d always been nervous on Ferris wheels. I remembered a time in high school when Sandra and I’d gotten on one and two guys a bit older climbed on with us. We couldn’t have been more than 15; they were maybe 17 or 18. They slipped into the seats opposite us slickly, toothy grins and gangly limbs folding into the little cart amazingly. Sandra and I kicked each other in the ankles, tried to act cool, avoided eye contact with each other for fear of losing it. The guys bantered back and forth with each other, making us laugh, and the better-looking one put his arm around Sandra when we got stuck at the top. He pushed his weight against the back of the cart so that it rocked back and forth. Sandra laughed crazily, a high-pitched unnatural laugh that sounded nothing like her real laugh. I gripped the bar and sucked my breath in sharply. The other guy smiled at my breasts and kept his hands to himself the whole way down. I couldn’t remember either of their names.

“I don’t usually like Ferris wheels,” I said to Tim when we’d gotten halfway up.

“Why not?” he asked; “they’re fun.”

“Some idiot teenagers scared me on one when I was younger.”

“Who? Did I know them?”

“Maybe,” I said; “I didn’t know them. I can’t remember their names.”

“Well, you’re safe with me,” he said and wrapped an arm around me. I rested my head on his shoulder and took his hand in mine again.

“Tim,” I said; “Listen. I have something to tell you.” I’d said the exact same thing to Sandra.

“Yeah?” he asked. His eyes were closed and his face was pointed toward the sun.

“I’m pregnant.”

His body stiffened at the words. He let go of my hand and turned to face me.

“What?”

“I’m pregnant,” I said. It sounded like a question.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

“Is it mine?”

“Yes,” I said, hurt. “Of course.”

“You sure about that?”

“Yes.”

“Fuck. You can’t be pregnant.”

“I am.”

“Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.”

“Tim,” I said. I imagined the mothers in the carts on either side of us, covering their children’s ears.

“Fuck!” he shouted. “Fuck. Julie. Fuck.”

“Can you say something else” I asked; “besides ‘Fuck’?”

He looked at me closer, as if to find something in my eyes that would tell him I was lying. I suddenly wished I were lying.

“I’m married,” he said. His voice sounded lower, deeper than it had been.

“You’re married?”

“I’m married,” he said and put his left hand out. I could see a faint tan line where a ring should be. “I’ve been married for six years.”

My stomach flipped and sloshed. The Ferris wheel cart rocked. I thought about all the people below whose day I would ruin if I puked over the side of the cart.

“I’m sorry,” he said. He sounded sincere.

I couldn’t talk. My mouth had gone dry. I was afraid if I opened my mouth, I’d throw up all over him, or myself, or the cart. The ride moved down and came to a stop. He held onto my arm and helped me out of the cart and to a bench next to a funnel cake cart. People moved all around us, holding corn dogs and sodas and stuffed victories in shapes of bears and tigers.

“Listen,” he said when we were both sitting down. “I love my wife. I have no intention of leaving her. She thinks I’m traveling for work.”

“She thinks you had to drive to Atlanta for work?” I said. I didn’t know why it was so important to me to point out the stupidity of the lie.

“Yeah, I told her I had to drive because flights on such short notice were too expensive. I wanted to see you.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Yeah, I realized that when I was passing through Jacksonville. She didn’t question it though.”

“Your apartment,” I said; “a woman didn’t live there. You didn’t go home that night.”

“That’s not my place. It’s my friend Steve’s. He was out of town for the week and I have the key. I told my wife I was house-sitting for him and that I passed out watching a movie. It wasn’t exactly a lie.”

“Why?”

He was quiet for a moment. I heard children screaming at the nearby Tilt-o-Whirl; the worst ride.

“I don’t know. I saw you, and all of a sudden I was flooded by all this nostalgia. I used to watch you when we were in school. I always wanted to know you, but we were never friends. And you were so willing. You seemed lonely.”

I didn’t say anything.

“My wife and I had been fighting a lot. It was the holidays. I felt like I’d just do it once and get it out of my system and that would be it. But then we started talking every night and I just couldn’t stop. And you kept asking me to come here and I didn’t want to hurt you, so I arranged to come.”

I closed my eyes.

“Just get rid of it, okay?” he said.

I didn’t move or open my eyes. I wanted to talk to Sandra. I wanted to run to her; I wanted her to tell him to get away from me, to scream him back to where he came from. She

and Jason were shopping for a new comforter. I wondered if her phone would get reception inside of Bed, Bath, & Beyond.

“Just get rid of it, okay?” he repeated. “I’m sorry I lied, but I can’t have a baby with you.”

“You won’t,” I said. “We need to go.”

“Hey,” he said, and grabbed my hand. I held still, but I didn’t pull it away. “I promised you I would win you a fish.”

“I don’t want a fish,” I said.

“Come on, I promised I’d win you a fish. I’m not going to break my promise. It’s the least I can do.”

He pulled a few dollars out of his pocket and handed them to the man running the booth. Plastic bowls of limp goldfish were lined in rows. The man handed Tim a ping-pong ball and told him that if it landed in a bowl with a fish, he’d win the fish.

“I don’t want a fish,” I said. “Leave the fish alone. They don’t need to get hit with ping-pong balls.”

“Julie,” he said, positioning the ball. He chucked it forward and it landed expertly into a bowl with a fish. Slick. The man in the booth picked the bowl up and poured the fish into a plastic bag and tied it with a garbage twist. He gave it to Tim, who handed it to me.

“Fish don’t have feelings.”

The fish looked dazed and tried to right itself.

THE LAST BITE

It's a beautiful day out and Adrian is in a bad mood. I already know how this will end.

He's pacing in and out of the room while I read. His eyes are glassy, unfocused. I hate it when he lets his hunger get to this point.

"What's wrong?" I ask, even though I know.

"Nothing."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure."

He picks up his camera and kneels on the floor in front of one of the cats. She half-opens her green eyes. They were mud-colored when my roommate and I brought her home as a kitten. Adrian didn't like the cats at first; he says he's allergic. He didn't mention it when we were talking about getting a cat—or two. He waited until we brought them home, bundles of fur and energy, after we had already fallen in love with them, and he walked out for a few hours. He loves them now though. He especially likes taking pictures of the calico. I swear she poses for the snapshot before stretching and curling back into sleep.

"Are you hungry?" I ask.

"No."

“You look hungry,” I say. I know I’m pushing it too soon. I don’t care though. I get tired of dealing with his moods when eating is a quick fix. It’s stupid.

He doesn’t answer, so I turn back to my book and wait. It really is a nice day out. It’s sunny and the humidity is low. The chance of rain is less than ten percent. My hair looks great.

He paces around the room a few more times and pauses by the record player. He stoops down to thumb through the collection, the one we spent six weekends in a row procuring at thrift stores and struggling record shops. We managed some great finds at good prices: old Willie Nelson, Patsy Cline, some rare Dylan, and several Muddy Waters, along with about everything Neil Young has, and some fun stuff; Michael Jackson, Queen, The Commodores, Gladys Knight. We had fun doing that.

“Okay,” he says. “Let’s get some lunch.”

And here it comes.

“What do you want to eat?” I ask. It’s a stupid question. I regret it immediately. I should have suggested something right off the bat.

“I don’t know. I’ll pay for you,” he says. He wants me to forgive him for giving me the runaround and saying he wasn’t hungry. This is how this goes.

“Okay,” I say. “Where should we go?”

He shrugs. I have a chance. I give it my best shot.

“I’ve been in the mood for pizza,” I say. Pizza’s easy. Pizza’s cheap and fast and filling enough. Pizza could be the answer to all of our problems. It could solve this quickly.

Nope.

“No, no pizza,” he says, kneeling in front of the other cat. It doesn’t even bother opening its eyes. Adrian snaps a few close shots, putting focus on the ears. I wish I could take pictures the way he does. “How about Shalimar?” he asks.

I hate Indian food. He knows that. I glance back down at my book, and then back up at him. He looks straight at me. This is a dare. A fair enough dare, I suppose. He’s daring me to give something he loves another chance. I focus on the spot right above his caterpillar eyebrows.

“I don’t think I feel like Indian,” I say carefully.

“Well, I don’t want pizza.”

“That’s fine. We don’t have to have pizza. We can have something else.”

“I want Indian.”

“Okay, well, I don’t,” I say, trying to sound as light as possible. I don’t want this to turn into a fight. I don’t have the energy for it. Sometimes I wonder how many meals I’ve shared with him. How many thousands of swallows we’ve witnessed each other take. He likes to cook, which would be nice, but he likes to cook stuff I don’t like; food with heavy spices and thick aroma, sauced and chock full of cumin. I like simplicity. The simpler a meal, the better. I don’t have the stomach for complicated food.

Adrian glares at the cat and I turn in my chair, back to my book so I don’t have to look at him.

“If you really want Indian, go ahead without me. I don’t mind. I’ll get something on my own in a bit. I’m not starving.”

“But I’m paying.”

“You don’t have to though. You want Indian, so go have what you want. I’ll just wait for Melissa and eat with her.”

I do this on purpose. A little jab. Sometimes I can’t help it when he gets like this. Adrian doesn’t think my best friend is nearly as funny as everyone else does. He doesn’t like her jokes about when the last time he washed his hair might have been, or her offers to throw his cell phone out her car window on the way to work to save him the trouble of losing it. He doesn’t like her and never did. He doesn’t say it out loud, but I know. She doesn’t like him either, and she admits it. He says she’s disrespectful, and sometimes that’s true, but it doesn’t really make her less funny. It doesn’t make her less likely to want to eat pizza with me either.

“No, come on,” he says. “I want to eat with you. Let’s get in the car.”

“We should decide where we’re going first,” I say. There’s a certain way this has to go for it to have a chance of working. The pattern can’t be broken and the price of gas is too high to talk about it in the car. Last week I spent about nine dollars and change in gas while we tried to pick a place to eat.

“Sandwiches?” I ask. “Publix subs? Or we could try something new?”

We talk about opening our own little sandwich shop together someday. He wants to call it “The Last Bite,” because he always eats the last bite of my food, whether I want it or not. I usually can’t manage to make it to the end of a meal. I think it’s a cute name, a cute idea. He’s been having the last bite for the past six years.

His eyes are getting glassier. We both look at the first cat, who has rolled onto her back and splayed her legs. Ladylike.

“I’m just going to go to Helena’s,” he says. Helena likes Indian food. He makes it for her sometimes, as a matter of fact. Melissa has a problem with the fact that he cooks for a female friend. She says it’s bullshit. I have guy friends, though, I remind her regularly, so what can I really say? I don’t love it, but I love him. I do trust him and I don’t want him to get upset because of my insecurities.

He shuffles around the room, checking his pockets for his wallet and house key. He does this on purpose. He’s stalling. He wants me to stew on it. I take the bluff.

“Okay.” I lean back in my chair and open my book wider, keeping my eyes on the stitching in the spine. He lingers for a few seconds, then walks out. He slams the door hard enough to make both cats jump to their feet, then crouch in alarm. They’re pissed. I’m two sentences back into the book when the door opens back up. He probably didn’t even walk to the end of the street. I think he just stands outside long enough to let the cats settle back down.

“Come on,” he says again. “Let’s go.”

I give in. It’s easier than being stubborn.

“How about Sweet Tomatoes,” I try. I’m getting hungry and it’s a fail-safe. When we started dating in high school it was the first non fast-food restaurant we went to together. I know he needs to eat, and my pizza craving isn’t strong enough to make a fight worth the bother.

His face softens. “Okay,” he says. “Just let me make a phone call, then we can go.”

He takes my phone outside. He lost his most recent one, and then decided he didn’t really need to spend money on a phone, since I have one. Melissa loved that. I thought her eyes were going to roll back into her head and stay that way when she worked it out. It is what it is, though. It’s easier to let him use my phone than to nag him to get his own.

I move to the kitchen and wipe down the counters. I have to do it. It's a calming thing. I like the monotony, the ceremony, the feeling of accomplishment, the end result—a clean, shiny surface; something I can control and keep nice. I spray Windex onto the paper towel harder than is necessary. I wipe the side of the fridge and around the stove for good measure. The burners are dirty. I should get new ones.

When he comes back his shoulders are hunched. His head is low. I wash my hands and grab my purse. He has his hand on the doorknob. Time is running out.

“Ready?” he asks.

“Yep, let's go.”

We walk to my car in silence and my stomach growls. He's looking the other way at something terribly fascinating at the end of the street that I can't seem to see. Before we make it to the first stoplight he changes the CD I was listening to the night before with Melissa. We saw a movie and got ice cream—one of our preferred routines together. Adrian was out with people I don't know. Smoking friends. I never got into it.

I shift in my seat and grip the steering wheel, pressing on the gas, willing my car to get a move on. God help me if we get stuck behind a bus. I notice that the hole in his cargo pants has gotten bigger; his entire thigh is visible. I've begged him to throw them away and buy some new pants. He says I'm too superficial about stuff like that and that they cover his ass, so there's no problem.

My high school prom picture is the nicest picture I have of us together. My parents have it framed on the piano at their house. He wore a suit and cut his hair for the occasion. I loved my dress. When we started dating, we never fought about food. We talked music and politics

and I loved his righteousness. He was the opposite of the guy before him, John. John was clean cut, sometimes fussy, and we spent hours upon hours together, listening to CDs in my bedroom, taking walks, watching movies. He and Melissa were pals, which made everything easier, but John got back together with an ex and was out of my life as quickly as he'd entered it. I liked that Adrian was the polar opposite of John. It helped.

I don't know the music Adrian puts on. It must be something I'm not cool enough to know. He needs to eat. His hands are stuffed into his pockets and he hasn't said a word to me since he caught me with the Windex. My cleaning habits annoy him. I can't really remember when he started doing this going all day without food thing. It drives me crazy though.

We park and walk into the restaurant silently. I make an effort.

"I'm going to start a Lettuce-Hater's Anonymous group online," I say. He loves to tell people about my salads, which consist of carrots, olives, cucumbers, tomatoes, sunflower seeds, and croutons. Lettuce is for rabbits, freaks, and sickos, I say. It crunches like beetle shells; I can't stand it. My effort doesn't work though. He doesn't crack a smile.

"Can I use your phone again?" He pulls it out of my purse before I have a chance to answer and goes outside while I gather trays and plates for both of us. He comes back less than a minute later.

I try again.

"We should start wearing matching outfits," I say, pointing to an older man and woman, who are both wearing pink Walk For The Cure t-shirts and khaki shorts. "Look, he doesn't like lettuce either." The old man is piling hard-boiled eggs and raisins on his plate; his wife presses

on his arm with one hand, the other holding tongs choked with romaine. She sees me looking at them and smiles, rolling her eyes a little. “Men,” she mouths to me and I smile back. Adrian takes her lead and goes for the iceberg. I brush past him, filling my tray quickly, mechanically, and reach the register while he examines salad dressings.

“Are these together?” the girl behind the counter asks, jerking her head toward Adrian.

“No, separate,” I say. I pay for myself quickly, with my debit card, and leave him amongst the olive oils and vinegars.

Bite, chew, swallow. I have a little food in me by the time he makes it to the table.

My parents have always been pretty good about him. They welcomed him with open arms when he first started hanging around. To her credit, Melissa tried at first. She was actually the one who suggested we invite him over one night.

“Time to forget about John,” she said. “He’s being a jerk. Have some fun.”

I did have fun. It didn’t take long for us to become an established couple and it felt good. Adrian was popular in a weird way, an off-the-beaten-path-kind-of-way. Everyone wanted to be his friend and I was excited to be his girlfriend. We were young and everything was new and I loved it.

Adrian sits down and I take a bigger bite than I normally would. He lets me chew and sips his drink, then leans forward.

“I was going to pay for you.”

“I didn’t know if that offer still stood.”

This is risky business. I know it.

“Why wouldn’t it still stand?”

Risky business. I take it.

“You seem kind of mad at me.”

“How?”

“You just do.”

“I told you I’d pay for you.”

“It doesn’t matter; it’s fine. I don’t mind.” I bite, chew, swallow.

He bites, chews, swallows. His breathing slows down and I wait for it.

“When we’re old I hope you get a hairdo like that,” he says, pointing to a large woman with a frizzy up-do that even the low humidity hasn’t helped. We both chuckle softly and the sun shines through the window. By the time we get through soup and pasta he’s not hunching anymore. His eyes have lost the glass and I can look at him.

He picks the last bite of the blueberry muffin off my plate and pops it in his mouth.

Melissa never has serious boyfriends. When she dates, she only sees a guy for a few weeks. She works a lot. A few guys have just stopped calling her, abruptly, and she never understands why. The ones who are really into her she doesn’t like. The ones she really likes don’t like her. Adrian says it’s her brashness. I think she just doesn’t have a lot of relationship experience.

Adrian and I walk out to the car. He tries harder.

“Can I buy you some ice cream?” He puts his arm around my waist and I follow suit.

“You can buy me anything.” I smile, with teeth.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” I say. “I’m fine. I’m good.”

THE WAY IT (REALLY) IS

Ian Lester drank Coke from a can and thought about a girl from school. They had three out of seven classes together: Honors English, World History and Algebra. He was no good at Algebra and sat away from her during the class so that she'd never ask about his grades when tests were turned back. When he got the last test back, he changed the "F" to "Fucked," wrote "You're," above the "Fucked" and buried the test at the bottom of his book bag.

Her name, Layna, meant "light and truth" in Greek. He had looked it up on the Internet. Ian didn't know if she was actually Greek or if she just had a Greek name. She was heavy in the hips and had red hair, but dark red, not orange like other redheads he'd seen. She may have dyed it herself from a box. Ian's sister did that sometimes, badly. He liked the way Layna's hair looked and her heavy hips and the sound of her voice when she raised her hand to answer questions. She distracted him.

Ian's best friend, Arlo, shit his pants at an outdoor concert the summer before while waiting for a Port-o-Potty. Word spread fast. Ian hadn't been there because of a broken wrist that hadn't healed enough yet for the dangers of outdoor music, but he had heard about it and tried to make Arlo feel better, even though he didn't know how.

"People probably thought it was funny," Ian said to Arlo, over the phone.

"I don't think it's funny," Arlo said.

“Maybe if you do think it’s funny, other people will too and then it won’t be a big deal.”

“Everyone was laughing.”

“Because it’s kind of funny!”

“It’s not funny.”

“Okay.”

“It’s not.”

“Okay.”

Ian didn’t bring it up again and avoided people who talked about Arlo’s accident. When asked if he’d heard, he said “No,” and changed the subject. He didn’t defend Arlo and talk about how the lines were too long and the concert food was probably no good and that Arlo didn’t usually shit his pants. He just said “No,” and changed the subject.

Ian and Arlo formed a friendship in grade school that was largely based on sharing dirty jokes they weren’t supposed to repeat, video games and a mutual dislike of their fourth grade teacher. As they got older—thirteen, fourteen, fifteen—the conversations shifted focus.

Girls liked Ian, at least more than they liked Arlo. Arlo didn’t have much luck. Ian didn’t like to talk to Arlo about girls as much as Arlo asked about them. He kept Layna a secret.

He thought about her all the time. He thought about her red hair and the way her jeans pulled across her stomach and how she only ever raised her hand halfway in the air to answer questions, never all the way up. He wondered what her armpit looked like, but never saw it. She wore a jacket over her top on most days, so even if she did raise her hand all the way up, he never would get to see her armpit. Sleeveless shirts were against the school’s dress code anyway. Some girls tried to break the rule and would have to wear T-shirts or jackets from the

clothing donation center that was located in the nurse's office. Layna never seemed to try to break the rule. Ian wished she would.

At night, sometimes, he would look on the internet for advice on how to talk to Layna. He had liked girls before, and girls had liked him. The girls he had taken out before, Ian realized, had come after him. They would giggle and slap him playfully and get their friends to ask him if he was interested and usually he went along with it. *They made it so easy.* Layna's friends didn't ask Ian if he was interested in her and she barely smiled at him, except in Honors English sometimes when he made puns with their vocabulary words, puns that were so bad they made their teacher, Mrs. Fell, rub her forehead and say, "Oh, Ian, honey, no more!" Arlo pointed out cute girls to Ian all the time. Cute girls didn't usually talk to Arlo before or after he shit his pants, so Arlo liked to hear stories from Ian about feeling up girls under their shirts and trying to get more. Ian humored Arlo sometimes. He would tell him stories that were not entirely truthful, which made Arlo even more interested.

Online, Ian found pages of advice about how to handle women, mostly from men's magazine websites. *Ignore them. Don't call. Give them a little attention and then don't call. Flirt with every girl in the room but the one you want.* He wasn't convinced.

On a Friday morning before the sun was out, Amelia Elliot made her grocery list:

Milk, 2%
Eggs
Breadcrumbs
TP
Paper towels
Aluminum foil
Apples

Merlot

Amelia needed other stuff too but she couldn't remember all of it off the top of her head. The things on her list were the things she had coupons for, plus the apples and Merlot. She had made the list at 5:30 AM, too early to vacuum or run the dishwasher or put the TV on. Everything was silent. David, her husband, would sleep until 6:30, at least, before he had to get ready for work. Amelia would get the kids up and ready for school at 7.

She searched online for ways to lose post-baby fat without going to the gym. After four years is it still considered post-baby fat? She looked that up too. Then she looked up a recipe for garlic green beans and planned that night's dinner. She added red potatoes to the grocery list.

One hundred and thirty-two emails in the inbox. Too many to go through before the day starts. The spam filter caught most of the sex solicitation and penis enlargement and Nigerian money scams, along with the Viagra and mortgage offers. She sent them to the trash. The majority of the emails came from the "Contact Me" form on her website. Her husband, David, didn't know about her website. It was a hobby, so to speak.

She had been doing it secretly for a long time. Something just for her. She didn't want to share it with David. *How do you explain to your husband that you pose as an androgynous relationship expert when you haven't had sex in eight months?* She was a mother. A wife. Not a writer or a psychologist. She had grocery shopping to do.

The day before had been a Teacher's Work Day, meaning her daughters had been home all day, and as a result, Amelia was behind on housework and emails. At 6:30, she heard David turn the shower on. She answered a few more emails:

--Dear All Alone,

Sounds to me like the guy is a loser. You can stay with him, but then you make it your problem. I say find a new one! Think about all of the great things you have to offer to someone who deserves you! The truth is, success is the greatest revenge, and once you move on and succeed this period in your life will be nothing more than a learning experience.

-The Truth

--Dear Crybaby,

You can only cry for so long. Dry off and get yourself together. You owe it to your future self! The truth is, he's probably not devoting nearly as much time to thinking and crying about you as you are to him. Why waste your energy on someone who doesn't care? Get involved in something; volunteer, learn to cook, find a hobby. Time will tell.

-The Truth

She made biscuits with sausage for breakfast and felt sorry she couldn't always give people longer responses. Eggs were on her grocery list, but she had used the last of them in a batch of banana bread she made with the girls on the teachers' workday. The bananas were going to go bad.

Amelia worked on autopilot. She set the table, poured the coffee and put out the juice. No clean forks. She pulled some out of the dishwasher and washed them by hand. The timer on the stove started ringing at the same time Mallory yelled for help with her hair. Amelia pulled the biscuits out of the oven and covered them with a tea towel. She untangled the girl's hair gently. David yelled from downstairs. The sausage wasn't cooked yet.

What would I tell “Mother of Two with Husband Who Can’t Make His Own Sausage And Doesn’t Ever Try To Touch Her Anymore” if I was answering an email? I’d tell her to take her kids and her sausage and find a man who could do everything right. There were men out there who could make their own sausage. I’m sure of it.

Ian told Arlo about Layna. It slipped out by accident when she walked past them during lunch with a gaggle of friends. She smiled in their direction and Arlo waved. He had four out of seven classes with Layna and he sat behind her in one of them. Two of the classes, all three had together. Ian sat behind Arlo in both of those classes and had a perfect view of Layna’s whole right half. Layna sat at the front of the room, always in front of the teacher. She had friends in all of her classes. Ian wished he was in all of her classes with her.

Arlo was eating French fries when Ian told him.

“What do you like about her?”

“I don’t know. Everything. She’s hot.”

“Are you going to ask her out?”

“Don’t know. I want to.”

“She’s nice. We sit together in Biology.”

“Yeah.” Ian took a fry.

“So you don’t know if you’re going to ask her out or not?”

“I don’t really know her.”

“I can introduce you.”

“No, I’ll figure it out.”

“Okay, just let me know. She’s cool.”

After school, Ian and Arlo played video games on Ian’s parents’ big-screen TV and his mother reminded them to take their shoes off on the carpet. The house Ian lived in with his parents was painted robin’s egg blue, unusual for the neighborhood of taupes and beiges, Ian’s father had told him. They all looked white to Ian. His mother called her decorating style country-shabby-chic. Ian didn’t know what country-shabby-chic meant, but he knew his mother decorated with oil lamps and wooden furniture and ivory-colored couch covers with embroidered pink roses and green ivy. *Do roses and ivy grow together in nature?* He didn’t know. He thought about Layna and about kissing her on the couch covers after his parents went to sleep, the ivy wrapping around her body and the roses blooming from her head. He thought about putting his hand up her shirt and feeling around and not telling Arlo about it.

Arlo stayed for dinner. Ian’s mother made spaghetti and meatballs with garlic bread and salad. Arlo never had Ian over for dinner. Ian figured it was because Arlo lived with his dad and his dad probably couldn’t cook. At Arlo’s house, there were two Rottweilers named Bunko and Popeye. Popeye had one eye. The other eye had popped out during a fight, according to Arlo’s father who always laughed when he told the story.

After dinner, Arlo went home and Ian cleaned the dishes too fast to actually get them clean. “Homework,” he told his parents. His sister, Marianna, called from Arkansas, where she went to college, and that distracted his mother enough for Ian to get away without drying the dishes. His mother picked up a rag and started drying them herself with the phone pressed between her ear and shoulder.

In his room, Ian waited for his computer to boot up and kicked his shoes into the open closet. He hadn't decorated with posters and the walls were bare, white and looked dirty with the fan light on. Ian thought about Layna in his room, on his bed, underneath him, looking at the dirty walls and wanting to stop, suddenly. He wet a rag in the bathroom and rubbed it on a spot on the wall above his desk. *That's good. That looks whiter.*

His email box was empty, except for notifications from music and video game forums he belonged to. No response from The Truth. He had written to The Truth two days earlier, after going through the entire archives. *The Way It (Really) Is*, written by The Truth, was linked from another site Ian had searched on. He had typed different things in the search engine and had gotten a lot of responses, most of which seemed to be written by people Ian's own age. He was embarrassed that he had been searching for advice on the Internet and he was unimpressed with what he found until clicked on a link another user had posted with the title "Everything you ever need to know about relationships can be found here." The Truth, Ian found, knew more than he could imagine about the ways men and women interacted and took email inquiries for personal questions, with the stipulation that the best questions would be posted anonymously with The Truth's answers. Ian didn't think that The Truth would find his question interesting enough to post it and even if he did, it would be anonymous, so it didn't matter. He was careful to check his spelling before sending the message.

Dear The Truth,

I like a girl from school. The problem is, I don't really know her. My friend is friends with her and offered to introduce me, but I feel like an idiot. Should I just talk to her on my own or let them introduce us? Thanks for your help.

Truly yours,

I

He read it seven times before sending. On the fifth read he noticed that he spelled “introduce” wrong and fixed it.

David Elliot had suspicions. His wife, Amelia, seemed unhappy but he didn’t want to blame himself. He remembered wanting to marry her. He picked out a ring and planned a careful proposal. He built up the nerve. They had been dating for sixteen months when he did it; she was wearing a blue dress that fell to the knees and matched her eyes. She said yes. Everything happened fast after that. Top speed. The wedding came and went in a blur, the honeymoon shortened when Amelia’s mother got sick the next week and then Mallory was born a few months later. Rachel, only two years after her. Amelia kept the house clean and cooked and got the girls to school, made banana bread with them and she remembered everyone’s birthday. She even left cards with \$10 bills in them for the mailman every year. She did everything the same as she always had, but she no longer talked to him. *When did we stop having conversation? When did we stop having sex?* David tried to nail down turning points in their relationship, to figure out when everything became directive or merely informative—*meeting with Rachel’s teacher on Tuesday, can you pick up cold cuts for sandwiches this weekend, please, your mother called yesterday, call her back.* She spoke in orders, her words strung together in lists.

She can't be having an affair. Not a regular one anyway. Maybe she just found someone else to talk to. That could be. David tried to pinpoint when Amelia stopped having anything interesting to say to him, or anything, really, to say at all.

Ian received a response email from The Truth on a Saturday, eight days from when he sent his email.

Dear I,

If you don't really know her, how much do you really like her? What is it that you like about her? If you ask her out and she says no, what's the worst that could happen. More importantly, if your friend is willing to introduce you, why wouldn't you take that opportunity? You asked if you should talk to her on your own or if you should let your friend take the reigns. The truth is, it really depends on what kind of outcome you're expecting. My advice: don't make it a bigger deal than it has to be.

-The Truth

Ian looked at The Truth's words until they blurred together in black wobbly lines that ran across the screen. He tried to call Arlo, but got no answer. The Truth hadn't posted his email in the archives. He was relieved about that. He tried to call Arlo again. No answer.

Amelia lived on lists. She had gotten into the habit of making them for everything she could think to make a list for. It was calming. Crossing things off the lists, one by one, watching the responsibilities float away even though they always boomeranged back.

To Do:

Laundry

Store

Dry Cleaners

New shoes for A

BD present for D?

Linens

David was asking questions. *He thinks I'm having an affair. If I were having an affair, I would come up with a code word for it to put on a list. To Do: Watergate. To Do: Banana Hammock. To Do: Replenish Vitamin Supplements.*

Amelia's answers to inquiries were becoming shorter, to the point. She couldn't keep up with the traffic. *Am I even helping anymore? The point of the whole thing is to help. Real, honest advice, no bullshit, just The Truth.* It was calming to read about the desperation of others, unlucky in love, too confused to answer their own questions, to resolve their sorry situations, to pull themselves up when they were kicked down or to resolve situations like adults. The last advice she had given was to a teenager with a case of puppy love, from the sounds of it, and got an almost immediate reply.

Dear The Truth

Thanks for your help. You're right. I'm going to get my friend to make something happen. I really appreciate it. Thank you.

-I

Amelia pitied him. It was important to be tough with kids. Tough love. It worked with her kids.

I,

Glad to hear it. Just remember, seeing someone at school and knowing them are two different

things. You might find that when you get to know her, she's nothing like what you suspected.

Either way, it's better to try than to do nothing at all. Good luck!

-TT

She liked helping and being thanked for it. *Helping all the lonely people. That's what's important.*

Arlo woke up to an empty house on Sunday morning and cooked himself an egg, over easy, with two slices of toast, buttered, and he microwaved a frozen sausage. He ate off of a paper plate and drank a soda instead of juice because they were out. His father worked weekends and his mother was dead. Arlo let the dogs out back, and then got on his computer. He checked his normal websites. He had an email and read it quickly, then again, slowly. He took a shower, used soap, and got dressed in clean jeans and a plain blue shirt. He brushed his hair.

He hesitated. Ian had called twice the day before and he never called him back. Arlo changed his shirt. He sent Ian a text message that said "Sorry, busy today, call you later." He left for the park.

When Ian and Arlo were young, Ian's mother had gone down to the school and defended both of them when she received a call about Ian being disruptive. Arlo's mother was already

dead and couldn't defend him. "They're good boys," she said to the principal and the teacher, who wore embroidered sweaters and dyed her hair silver. "They have spirit. You can't fault them for that." In the end, they were allowed to sit together for art projects and reading, but not for math, science or history.

Arlo's message aggravated Ian. *Arlo's never busy.* He wondered if something was wrong.

Ian's mother was vacuuming the sofa with a handheld cleaner when Ian came down the stairs. He shouted over the noise of the machine.

"I'm going out, see you later."

"Where are you going?"

"Out."

"Where?"

"To Arlo's."

"Oh, have a good time. Tell him he can come for lunch if he's hungry."

Ian walked quickly and was sweating a little when he got to Arlo's house. Bunko and Popeye were outside, standing massive at the corner of the house, behind a chain link fence. Bunko barked at passing cars.

Ian knocked on the door and then knocked again harder. He squinted through the blinds at the window. *No one is home.* He texted Arlo back.

"Where are you?"

David found the site. *David found the site.* Amelia's ears rang. She left her email up, *stupidly, stupidly, stupidly.* He saw the hundreds of emails she had exchanged with all the lonely people, as she called them, all the lonely people who needed her. The site was linked in her signature. *David found the site.*

"I need you," David said. "We need you." He gestured toward the hall, where their daughters' bedrooms were.

"I give you everything," she said. Her voice sounded quiet, but it echoed around her head.

"I just don't understand why you would keep something like this a secret from me?"

"I can't talk to you," Amelia said, and she walked out the front door and got in her car and drove away.

At the park that was in between Ian's house and Arlo's house, Ian sat on a picnic table and watched a squirrel steal potato chips out of a bag that hadn't made it into the trashcan. The squirrel took a broken chip and ran it up a tree. The chip broke more. A piece fell from the squirrel's mouth. The squirrel didn't seem to notice.

Ian and Arlo had a conversation about girls when they became interesting awhile back.

"Would you ask out a girl even if you didn't know if she was interested?" Ian asked Arlo.

"I think that you can't always wait for them to make a move because what if they're waiting for you to?" Arlo said.

It made sense. Ian still always waited for them. Arlo never asked girls out anyway. He never had a girlfriend.

Layna waited on a bench and looked at a magazine she had received in the mail that morning. It promised tips on how to shape eyebrows and what to eat at parties.

Amelia stopped at a park. She saw a man walking a baby in a stroller. It was a girl baby with a pink hat shielding her face from the sun. People walked their dogs. A couple with a Golden Retriever struggled to have a conversation while the dog pulled at the leash. A woman with a Pekingese held her dog as she walked around the track and placed it on the grass periodically so it could sniff and bark at squirrels. A trashcan was overflowing. A shame for taxpayers. She pulled out of the parking lot and headed toward the highway. She thought about all the lonely people.

Arlo propped a yellow beach cruiser against the opposite end of the bench that Layna sat on. Ian watched, fists clenched, keeping his eyes focused on Layna's dark red hair while Arlo smiled and walked towards her and then sat on the bench next to her. When Arlo kissed her on the lips, Ian noticed that her shirt was riding up in the back and he could see a strip of white skin in the gap between her jeans and top.

David called Amelia's cell phone on the hour, every hour, throughout the week. She didn't answer. He helped the girls get dressed; he cooked their breakfasts and tried to brush their hair. Mallory's teacher called twice to ask what was wrong at home.

David logged into Amelia's email and was surprised that she hadn't changed her password. Her inbox was full of emails from email addresses he didn't recognize. The subjects were pleading. *I need you. More advice please. Please help. Where have you been?*

David wondered if he should feel ashamed for going through Amelia's private emails but he was fascinated by the trust strangers had put in his wife. *She's disappointing them. She's being selfish.*

He read through the archives of her website. Marveled at the desperation in the words of her followers. Their pleas became his pleas and he dropped his head to the desk.

He tried to call Amelia again. Her voicemail box was full. He wanted to tell her he needed her.

She didn't answer.

Ian didn't answer when Arlo tried to call him back, not on the third or fourth or fifth try. When his mother told him Arlo was at the door, Ian told her to tell him to go away. She let him in.

"Hey, is your phone broken or something? I've been trying to call you," Arlo said, pushing the door to Ian's room open.

"Fuck off."

"What?"

“I saw you.”

“Saw me what?”

“I saw you with her.”

“Oh.”

Arlo looked around the room and shifted his weight from foot to foot.

“So fuck off.”

“You said you didn’t want me to introduce you to her.”

“But you knew I liked her.”

“You don’t even know her.”

“I wanted to know her.”

“I tried to talk to her about you to help you out and she kissed me. She came on to me.
I’m sorry.”

Arlo looked right at him when he said it. Ian broke eye contact.

Amelia went home on a Monday. She had been gone for over a week. She missed her kids. She missed her site.

The house smelled like breakfast. The beds were unmade. She walked through the house on soft feet.

He got the kids to school. He made them breakfast. He’s not here.

She checked all of the rooms in the house for signs of life. Her computer was on, a picture of her family set as the background. She sat in the computer chair.

Her email box was tidy, perfectly archived, completely unlike how she left it. She scrolled through the Sent mail and flushed over.

Each email that had come in her absence had been answered. Thoughtful, kind answers, replying to the desperation of all the lonely people in the world who depended on her.

Dear Confused,

Sometimes the only thing you can do is let go. People we love will disappoint us. People we love will scare us. People we love can even disappear. The truth is, we need to take care of the things and people that are important to us before they're gone. You can only control yourself in this situation. Let go and grow. You can learn from this.

Sincerely,

The Truth II

Amelia made lists. One list was for groceries. One was a To Do. She spilled tears on her lists. The lists that got the wettest were titled Reasons to Stay and Reasons to Go.

She made the beds.

OPAL

This would be your life if you were Opal Pinafore:

You grow up wearing pink dresses with ruffles and matching hats and pigtailed hair. Your father plays oldies radio on the AM dial during dinner and you know the words to all the songs.

You know the stories of Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel and you are able to recite them to your grandparents, who beam at you with joy. Your grades are good. You like to read. Your parents have another baby. He's all right. You grow up like any other normal kid. Then, around 15 or 16 you become difficult. A regular kind of difficult, like all 15- and 16-year-olds are. You sit in your room listening to headphones and ignore calls for dinner. Your eyes roll at compliments and criticisms. You can never find anything to wear. You are that understandable kind of difficult long enough for your parents to stop worrying about you. "It's a phase," they reassure each other, until you turn 18 and take off in an old green sedan with this girl, Julie, and her boyfriend and a few of his friends. You think that your parents shouldn't be surprised.

As Opal Pinafore, you quickly learn how to spare-change people walking by. You sit in front of McDonald's restaurants and the public library, holding your hand out to passersby, never making eye contact, keeping your eyes toward the ground. Your hair sticks to the back of your neck in the hot Florida sun and you agree to move to Seattle with your new friends without much thought. "The spare-changing is better there," they say, because they heard it through the street-

kid grapevine, and you move right along, because going back to AM radio over meatloaf and mashed doesn't sound appealing at all.

At first, you feel guilty about the family you're missing, because really, they were so good to you, but you firmly believe you made the right move. The trek to Seattle is long. You sleep in the back of a van under an itchy orange blanket and wash yourself in sinks at fast food restaurants. You hear all kinds of stories, some that sound tall to you, but that are fascinating all the same, stories about running away from the cops and diving into bushes and smoking the best whatever there was available at the time.

Once you arrive, you go inside the public library that everyone spare-changes in front of and it is phenomenal. Better than the one back home. The group of kids breaks off into pairs, randomly running back into each other throughout each day, faking scorn for the public. You end up with a curly-headed boy named Santiago. "From *Old Man and the Sea*?" you ask him, and he smiles through gapped teeth and replies, "No, from my great-grandfather."

While Santiago spare-changes outside the library every day so you can eat, you take breaks and sit up on the fourth floor inside, reading book after book after book. You tell Santiago all about the things you read while he was spare-changing for the Wendy's kiddie meals you eat for dinner, and he watches you with an intensity no 18-year-old boy should have.

"I can stay. I want to help," you say.

"No, you go read. We need your brains," he says, pulling on another thrift store coat.

Friends of yours, acquaintances really, die. It's inevitable. Some become prostitutes, some do drugs, some do this and some do that. You ask Santiago to stop giving you the details. He becomes more protective, so you think, shoving his hands into the backs of your jeans pockets and fingering the wool of your red cable knit sweater from the Salvation Army when police officers or other men approach you.

"Do you ever think about your family?" you ask Santiago while watching two pigeons peck at a forgotten soft pretzel with mustard next to the trash.

"Sometimes," he says. "Not a lot. My father was a hard worker, a hard hard worker, but a hard drinker too. There was no place for me there."

"What about your mother?"

"Dead."

Before too long, Santiago announces to you that he wants to get a real job and that he wants to live with you in a real apartment. You're thrilled. You crave a bed and hot showers and you're tired of the YMCA.

It takes awhile, but Santiago finally gets work painting houses with a man named Eddie who smells like turpentine and has rainbow-crust knuckles. You and Santiago celebrate by sneaking into a movie where he kisses you during a murder scene. You laugh at his lack of timing, but you let him kiss you and it's strange but good, like sleeping uninterrupted for a whole night or inhaling the scent of freshly washed clothes. You walk to the park together and fall asleep behind a bench and for the first time he sleeps with his arms around you. You're grateful for his warmth.

While Santiago works and saves up real money you look for a job. The librarian decides to give you a chance because she recognizes you as one of the few who always puts the books back where they belong, and you start on a Monday at 9 AM sharp. Santiago buys you new clothes from the Salvation Army and you wash them at the Laundromat, armed with a sock of quarters.

Your first day involves a lot of organizing. Two other girls, Mary and Joanna, are designated as your superiors and you are to report to them with questions. They size you up upon first arrival and spend the rest of the day whispering and flashing fake smiles. Later in the day, the head librarian takes you aside and asks why you didn't shelve the books she had asked you to shelve. She points to a table piled high with books you *know* you shelved, alphabetically, carefully, meticulously, and Mary and Joanna smile as they walk by together, hunched, clutching bottled Diet Sprites they bought when they went out for lunch. You don't tell, though; you don't say a word, because once you start getting paychecks you hope that they ask you to go to lunch with them.

Santiago waits for you after your first day of work, his brown curls flecked with white paint, and his smile turns into a frown when he sees your face, twisted with tears. "Tomorrow is another day," he says as he slips his hands into the backs of your pants pockets. He tells you with a jump in his voice that he's found a place for you to live together, a cheap studio place with no air conditioning, but a place all the same. In reality, it's known as a dump, but to you and Santiago it is everything. Eddie and his wife graciously give you an old mattress that was taking up space in their garage, Santiago tells you, and you let the excitement get the best of you.

The next day you go off to work and Santiago does the same. Time passes. You shelve books for weeks until you gain back the trust of the librarian, who moves you to checking people out. Mary and Joanna become less awful, even though they start referring to you as “Oh--pal.” Santiago develops the same rainbow-crust ed knuckles that plague Eddie, but you love them. In the evenings, you lie in bed in your own little studio apartment and you rub his hands with yours, examining the pinks and purples and greens and blues that coat the crevices. You use your own fingernails to chip away at the colors lining his.

“I get lonely sometimes,” you admit to him one day.

“How can I help?” he says. He works hard for you and you know it. He is so tired at night it’s hard for him to stay awake during dinner.

“Oh, you do everything right. It’s not you. I’ve been thinking about my mother. Sometimes I want to call her.”

“Call her.”

“I can’t call. Not after how I left.”

“They would be thrilled to hear from you, I’m sure.”

“They must hate me.”

“Impossible.”

On a Monday you come home from work to find an orange kitten cowering under the table inside of your dump, your wonderful, beautiful dump. She’s wearing a red collar and a note is on the table from Santiago. “I don’t suppose you want to call her Mary or Joanna?” it

says and you cry, clutching the animal, who struggles to escape with panicked “mews.”

Santiago steps out of the shower with a towel around his waist and you let the kitten spring from your hands as you rush to hug him. “For you,” he says. “A lady was just giving them away at the house we’re painting this week.”

On a Sunday, your day off, you go to the library for leisure, wanting nothing more than to sit on the third floor with a newspaper and pair of Sony headphones, so you can listen to Janis Joplin beg you to “Cry-ay-ay, Baby.” You read from cover to cover, the national, the local, sports, life and times, family, cartoons, obituaries and the personals.

“Do you think she misses her mother?” you ask Santiago later in the day, pointing at the kitten while she stalks a dust bunny under the card table you found at the Salvation Army for eight dollars.

“I don’t think animals really think about that sort of thing like we do,” he says.

You stew on that. Weeks pass before you make the call but you finally do it. After work on a Tuesday you dial the number you once knew by heart from a pay phone and you hope that your memory doesn’t fail you. Your mother’s voice says “Hello?” and you hesitate for a moment before answering.

“It’s Opal!” she shouts, and your heart pounds, amazed, delighted, shocked that they aren’t angry, not at all, that they’re thrilled to hear from you. “You need to visit, we want you to visit,” they say over and over, their voices bouncing off the walls of the pay phone. “We’ll buy you a plane ticket. What are you doing with yourself? Where do you live? You need to come home. Jacob asks about you all the time. We miss you.”

You rush home to tell Santiago about the phone call, but when you enter the hallway you feel cold. The front door to your efficiency is unlocked and you move quietly to the inside. Your orange kitten is sitting near the front door, very close to one of your shoes. You read in a book that cats like to be close to shoes because they can pretend they're other cats, and you make a quick mental note to ask Santiago if you can get a companion kitten. A gray one, you hope, or gray and black striped. The cat lets out a pathetic meow and you let out a more pathetic "Santi?"

He doesn't answer.

You find him in the bathroom, slumped over the toilet. A needle hangs from his left arm.

You wouldn't have known.

There would be no note, no explanation. Just you and a kitten in a gaping void of great big missing that isn't able to be explained by anyone who isn't truly a wanderer. People like you, who need hot showers and clean clothes, just cannot understand.

You call the police. You call your parents back. You have no one else to call. You have to go home.

The doctors say he didn't feel anything. It must have been an accident. "He just went to sleep," they say.

You couldn't have known.

AN ART TO FAMILY DINING

My parents hadn't lived together for ten years, but they thought it was important for the whole family to have holiday dinners together, no matter how old we got. "Until you get married off," my mother said, "we're having dinner together." My favorite brother, Gator, was flying in from Pittsburgh. He's a writer, which I'd always envied. I'm not at all artsy like my brothers. Gator had been working on screenplays, and was writing one about our family; he told me about it in secret. I gave him the idea to call it "An Art To Family Dining."

"Divorces do not belong at Thanksgiving dinner," our parents told us. "The plan is to have dinner as a family, the goal is to have a nice meal. The nice meal comes first. We have our eyes on the prize and the means to execute it well."

It was like they rehearsed, and come to think of it, they probably did. I did my best to be agreeable. There were no rules. I think maybe there should have been. Rules can't hurt. No swearing at the dinner table? Reasonable. No accusing the person next to you of hogging the butter or being responsible for your inability to have a normal functioning relationship? Fine. No comments about anyone's weight? Absolutely necessary. No backing each other up against the wall? Good rule. Maybe I should have written them down. It wouldn't make a difference though. No one wants to admit that there's an art to family dining.

Gator's name isn't really Gator. It's Gabriel, like the patron saint. When we were kids, our father took the two of us to the natural springs for a barbeque and canoeing. Our older brother, Greg, refused to go—he said the water was too cold for him and that we'd all freeze to death or get eaten by the alligators that lived in the river that led to the spring. We packed sandwiches and sodas and potato chips in a big blue cooler. Gator insisted on sitting near the bow of the canoe and Dad let him. We floated around, pointing out logs and leaves disguised as animals, snapping photos for Greg on a disposable camera. Dad tipped his baseball hat over his eyes and told us to man the ship. Gator pointed at the bag of chips we brought into the boat.

“Pass those over here,” he asked, quietly so Dad wouldn't wake up.

I reached in the bag and pulled out a handful of greasy chips. I shoved them in my mouth and chewed a few times, then opened my mouth to show him the mush.

“Gwen, come on.”

I preferred Gator to Greg, easily. He could take teasing. Greg couldn't. I got another handful of chips and tossed a few in the water.

Gator smiled and reached for the bag. I held it away from him. He tried to stand and swiped for the bag.

The canoe rocked.

Dad shifted and we froze. He stirred a bit, relaxed again. Gator and I watched each other.

“Please? I'm your favorite brother.”

Earlier in the week, I'd gotten in trouble at school for pouring finger paints on a boy who was teasing me. The school had trouble getting in touch with my parents, who were both

working, and finally called Gator out of his second grade class to come calm me down. “She’s just mad,” he told them. “Let her be mad.” He held my hand until I stopped crying angry tears and caught my breath. “You’re my favorite brother,” I told him on the way home after our mother came to pick us up. Gator told her that the kid deserved paint in his face and she took his word for it. “You’re my favorite brother,” I repeated to him in a whisper.

“You’ve only got two,” he said. This was before our parents had Mark, their last ditch effort to save their marriage.

“You’re my favorite,” I said.

I handed over the bag of chips and wiped my greasy hand on my shirt. Gator smiled and took a few.

“I see an alligator,” he said, quietly, unalarmed. He put some chips in his mouth and the crumbs fell to the front of his shirt.

“No you don’t,” I said.

“I wouldn’t lie to you, Gwenny.”

I knew he wouldn’t. He never did.

“Where?” I asked.

He pointed. A log floated in the water. It had two eyes attached to it. It didn’t look like it was moving.

“Is it dead?” I asked.

“No, it’s probably waiting for something to happen. Don’t be scared.”

I started to cry and Gator scooted over to me. The canoe rocked.

“I wish I was a gator,” he said, putting his arm around me.

“Why?” I asked. The tears were coming.

“Then I could fight that one for you.”

Our father woke up with a jolt, like he had been having a falling dream. He looked at my tears, then to Gator.

“Gabriel, why is she crying?”

“She’s afraid of the gator over there.” He pointed to the log with eyes.

My father sat up quickly, tensed.

“Why the hell didn’t you wake me?” he asked. He passed a paddle to Gator.

“You looked tired,” Gator said.

“Well, for Christ’s sake, son,” my father said and dipped the paddle in the water. I kept my eyes on the log. It didn’t blink or move until we got back to the bank, then it disappeared under the surface.

“I could have beat that gator,” Gator said, when we reached the bank. “Gwenny, you don’t have to cry anymore, we’re safe.”

My whole body shuddered.

“How about we name the gator,” our father said quickly. My parents gave names to things we were afraid of or didn’t like. It was a parenting trick they had developed together, when they still did things together.

“Gabriel,” I whispered.

“You want Gabe to name the gator?” our father said.

“No, the gator’s name is Gabriel,” I said. My tears stopped.

“If that gator is named Gabriel then what will we call Gabe?”

“Gator,” I said.

And it stuck.

My mother pronounces my name wrong. She says it, “Gwen-dah-lyn.” It doesn’t bother me that she can’t get it right. I didn’t even notice until I was about ten years old. I was standing in the only bathroom in the house—a house with three bedrooms and one bathroom—and I was sitting on the toilet with the cover down. The cover was one of those puffy soft ones with plastic pink roses embroidered in the middle “for maximum bathroom beautification,” my father used to tease after my mother had it put in. When sat upon, the toilet cover sank slowly and softly, sighing at the pressure, a kind of “shhhoooouuu,” and I always liked that. When relieved of body weight, it came slowly back to life like a sponge being unsqueezed. I liked that too. I used the muscles in my calves to lift my lower body onto and off of the toilet cover in ten second intervals. Down one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten. Up, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten. I tried counting it in Spanish. It “shooooouushed” quietly. My mother haphazardly applied makeup for a work party while telling me about her day. She explained in detail the things her coworkers and clients said, down to the kind of creamer she used in her coffee that may or may not have contributed to her stomach irritation around lunchtime and the hair growing out of the mole of Mr. Kerwin, who still wasn’t using deposit slips, no matter how many times she’d asked him to.

“And I swear, Gwen-dah-lyn, it’s everything I can do to not just hold his face and pluck the little hairs with a tweezer, just to do him the favor. I keep tweezers in my purse, you know,

and I feel like it would be so easy except you can't just do that to a person who hasn't asked for the help."

I stopped my counting and looked at her. She had muddy brown eyeliner millimeters above her actual lashline, which was typical. She never was good at applying makeup or dressing appropriately for special occasions, or for regular days, for that matter. She was, and still is, a longtime casualty of penny pinching and tight wallets. She won't spend on herself for anything. The eyeliner, I was sure, was a sample given to her by my aunt, her sister, or one of her work friends. The only time my mother ever read magazines was in long supermarket lines, since she'd never buy magazines, and those moments in line never gave her the time to read up on how to properly apply makeup. She and my father were running out of things to say to each other already at that point. I liked to keep her company.

Every time I hear my mother say my name I see that slapdash eyeliner.

"Gwendolyn!"

"Yeah?" I shouted.

"Can you run up to the store and pick up a pound of sugar and some sweet potatoes?"

"Sugar and sweet potatoes? How many sweet potatoes?"

"Six. And don't take the long way, Dad is picking Gator up at the airport and says he has a surprise for us."

"What's the surprise?"

“Gwen, if you don’t know, who does?” She held out her car keys. I had flown in from Connecticut the day before. I’m in a nursing program there because I wanted to live somewhere with seasons.

“Right,” I said. “I’m going to walk. I miss the heat.”

“Don’t take too long. They’ll be here soon.”

I tried to imagine what Gator’s surprise could be and why he would have kept it from me. That wasn’t like him; we’d gotten into the habit of calling each other regularly and of telling each other everything. I hadn’t heard from him for a few weeks, so when I heard there was a surprise, I got excited. It could be anything, knowing Gator. He once showed up with a dog, a Dalmatian; he said a group of firefighters gave it to him after he helped them put out a huge building fire. Another time he showed up with a tattoo, he said he got from losing a bet. It was on his forearm and our mother hated it.

“You have such beautiful skin,” she’d said. She loved talking about our skin. “You have your father’s beautiful skin, and you go and ruin it like it’s not a gift.”

“I just decorated it a little, Ma. No big deal,” Gator had said.

I knew Gator’s explanations were not entirely truthful because he would always tell me the real story. He got the Dalmatian at the pound after watching a group of firefighters put out a house fire. They didn’t actually have a Dalmatian with them, but he thought the scene was so exciting that he’d get one to remind him of it. He got the tattoo while he was drunk with some

friends one night. Part of Gator's charm, though, is his ability to turn something ordinary into a great story. I always loved being in on his secrets.

Gator is more fun than our older brother, Greg, who decided not to come this Thanksgiving. Greg had been trying to separate himself from the family for some time and according to Mom, he'd finally found an excuse. Greg makes movies. When he is around, he gripes about the latest movies and what trash they are. He makes references to reels and prints and wears all black all the time for no apparent reason. Gator says Greg thinks it makes him look more artsy. I say it makes him look colorblind. Greg wears his hair to his shoulders and dyes it magenta red. He buys the dye at Sally Beauty Supply, where teenagers and trashy girls shop. He can't really grow a beard so he settles for a goatee, which I've tried to tell him just makes him look creepy, but he rolls his eyes when I say it. Last Thanksgiving, Mom asked Greg about the latest movie he was filming and at the word "noir" Dad let out a huff. It was a little huff but a huff and we all heard it. Gator snorted. I held my breath. Mom ignored it all and helped herself to more cranberry sauce. She smiled at Greg, with so much hope on her face that I had to hold my breath harder.

"Yes, honey, noir. What's that?"

"Never mind," Greg said.

Dad and Gator had resumed eating. I was waiting. Mom didn't press him and we were quiet for a minute. I still hadn't taken a breath and then our younger brother, Mark, threw his fork in the air, so that it stabbed the ceiling and stuck there. Mark, who is fourteen, is an artist. I knew that, to him, forks in the ceiling looked like art. He'd come back later and sit in the middle of the table with canvas paper and a piece of charcoal and draw the whole scene. A piece of

potato fell from the fork, into the cranberry sauce; Mom started crying and Gator closed his eyes. I exhaled, and then took big gulps of air. I hate that we've gotten old enough for our parents to feel comfortable enough to cry in front of us.

We didn't have a pumpkin pie last year and I still think that was part of the problem. The pumpkins were too ugly, Mom said. I insisted on one this year and even offered to make it. Mom bought a Mrs. Fields and said it would have to do because the pumpkins were ugly this year too.

I walked to the only store open on Thanksgiving Day, which is owned by a Korean family. The son and I went to school together, all the way from elementary through high school. When I lived at home he'd sneak oranges with my name scrawled on them with Sharpie marker into my mother's grocery bags. He never spoke to me or signed his name to the gifts, but I knew they were from him and it always made me uneasy, even though my mother insisted it was sweet. I hoped he wouldn't be in the store.

I stopped at a crosswalk. Sugar and sweet potatoes. I wondered if Mom got whipped cream for the frozen pumpkin pie. If she didn't, it could ruin everything.

Last year Mom had the house fogged for bugs the day before Thanksgiving, so our food tasted a little bit like bug spray. Mark drew a picture of the family in cockroach form sitting around the table with a full spread. The cockroach version of me had thin eyebrows and a necklace with a star pendant. I'd coveted the necklace ever since. Mom framed the picture and put it on the fake mantel she had installed three years earlier. The house doesn't have a fireplace.

On the other side of the crosswalk, there was a homeless man leaning against the short wall that opened up to the bank parking lot. He wasn't paying attention to the cars whizzing by or to me. His things—a few tattered bags of what looked like garbage and a greasy white paper bag surrounded him. He was wearing jeans that didn't appear to be in such bad shape and a basketball team's promo shirt from three seasons ago, plus two windbreakers, blue on black. I stood, sweating in a tank top and jeans, and wondered how he could stand the heat. His facial hair was gray and long, but not too long; it looked like he might have had a chance to trim it somewhat recently. He looked tired, more than anything. He rummaged through his garbage bags and produced a small dish, then took a bottle of water from his greasy paper bag, which he poured into the dish and placed it on the ground. I noticed, suddenly, that the man had a cat on a leash; the cat hopped off the short wall and drank the water with gusto. The man sat next to the cat and leaned his head back. He closed his eyes and gave the cat a rough pat on the head.

The crosswalk light changed and I smiled in the direction of the cat. The man nodded at me and for a moment I wondered why he didn't have a family to have a nice, important dinner with or if he was even homeless at all. When I was a kid, I'd have wild fantasies while walking home from school. I'd daydream about elderly women asking for my help across the street, who would turn out to be rich countesses, giving me crisp one hundred dollar bills for my services. I'd daydream that Ricky Anderson, who sat next to me in music class and was my square dance partner sometimes, would ask me to start a duet with him and we'd sweep the school talent show together because I would suddenly be graced with the most beautiful voice, enhanced by Ricky's love for me. I swore that the turtle poking his head out of the canal I passed off the corner of

72nd and Vine surfaced simply to check on me, that he recognized me and we had a turtle-human companionship. Sometimes, I'd imagine that he'd say "Good Morning, Gwendolyn," in turtle-bubble speak and that I'd understand him perfectly fine because we were friends.

I wondered what would have popped into my head if I had passed the homeless man and his leashed cat when I was a kid. He wouldn't be homeless at all, it would turn out. He'd actually be a millionaire posing as a homeless person, as a social experiment to determine who in the city was decent enough to pay attention to an old homeless man. He would notice me when I passed him on my way to school and he would smile. Eventually we would say "Good Morning" to each other. "Good Morning" would turn into short chats and sooner or later I'd be allowed to pet the cat on the leash, maybe even hold it or walk it around the bank parking lot a time or two. When the time was right, the homeless man would reveal his true identity to me as the sole heir to his father's fortune and would reward me handsomely for my kindness and down-to-earth nature.

I nodded back at the man, but he had already closed his eyes and tipped his head back again.

I worked quickly in the store. Sweet potatoes, sugar, whipped cream for the frozen pie, and a little can of chopped turkey for the cat. I knew dinner would be at 4:00 and the clock at the store said 2:37. I grabbed a package of vacuum-sealed turkey. The girl who was stuck working on Thanksgiving did nothing to hide her displeasure at cashing me out. She bagged my groceries silently and stuffed the receipt in my bag, avoiding eye contact. She took my money quickly and

flinched when our hands touched at the exchange. The store was deserted; the girl flipped back to her magazine.

I walked back into the heat, back towards the man and his cat. He was dozing with a newspaper shielding his face from the sun. A car whizzed by on the mostly empty streets. No one obeyed traffic laws on holidays. The bank was closed, quiet. The cat, still on the leash, lay down at the man's feet and lifted his head when I walked up. I got nervous. The cat was white with orange cow spots. He was beautiful, the kind of cat that would get snapped up at a shelter or a pet store. He looked well-fed, for a homeless cat. His ears pricked at the sound of the can opening and I checked it for sharp edges. I left the can and the cold cuts next to the man and gingerly patted the cat's head. He ignored my touch and licked the gravy from the can.

It would be a good story to tell Gator, I decided. He was the type to appreciate a thing like a homeless man owning a cat on a leash. Mom wouldn't get it, Greg would be tortured over it, Dad would smile and ask some simple follow-up questions to prove his interest while achieving the exact opposite, Mark would nod, maybe sketch it, but Gator would laugh and appreciate the absurdity, the beauty of the sight. I knew that when I told him, he'd want to walk down there with me, see the cat, maybe even strike up a conversation with the man, get some history, turn it into a real story.

When I walked through the front door, Dad caught me in a hug. His face had thinned out within the last few years and his skin hung a little loose. I normally liked his gray stubble, but he had shaved for the occasion. My mom always preferred that. Dad is a nice guy, forever supportive of everyone except Greg, who he wants to understand, but doesn't. He's the nicest to

me because he knows me the least and he's okay with that. He tries to be nice to Mom, but she has no tolerance for him. Everything he says gets on her last nerve, no matter what it is. Still, my parents are the ones who insisted on continuing to have holiday dinners together after their divorce. It makes it easier on everyone, they say. Mom rushed past him and took the bag out of my hands, muttering something about tin foil and potatoes and flashed a big fake smile in our general direction. It worried me.

Gator came from the living room and hugged me tightly.

"What's the word, champ?" he said.

"The intention of the day is to have a nice meal," I said.

"You've been practicing that."

"You know it," I said. "Hey, so let me tell you about what I saw on my way to the store."

"One sec, Gwen, I have to show you the surprise."

I had forgotten about the surprise. Gator patted my back and took my elbow. He led me into the kitchen where our mother was scrubbing the sweet potatoes. She was concentrating hard. A girl sat at the breakfast table our mother had snagged off the side of the road in front of someone's house a few years ago. We called her "Garbage Picker," because she was constantly collecting other people's used, unwanted furniture for her own house. The girl's legs were crossed and she was sipping on a bubbling ginger ale. She smiled.

"Gwen, this is Rachel," Gator said, gesturing at the girl grandly. He did a little flourish with his hands.

"Who's she?" I asked. Mom scrubbed the potato in her hand harder. The orange flesh showed through.

Gator opened his mouth to answer, but Rachel got up from her seat and came at me with her arms open. Dad stood at the door, watching. He exchanged a glance with Mom that I didn't like.

"Gwendolyn, it's so nice to meet you. Gabe talks about you all the time," Rachel said, and she wrapped her arms around me lightly and kissed the air around my face on both sides.

Gator had never mentioned having a girlfriend, certainly not having one serious enough to bring home for Thanksgiving, to the nut house. We talked fairly regularly. I always told him when I was dating someone or interested in someone and he had always done the same.

"Gator, are you kidding?" I said. The girl was taller than him, with dirty blond hair that reached her waist in split ends that formed a V. She was dressed in a peasant-style dress the color of mud with orange flowers embroidered across the chest and she had ten turquoise rings on—one for each finger.

"Gwen," Mom said. "Come help me with the potatoes."

Gator looked hurt—he'd wanted me to be happy about it, I could see. I looked from him, to Rachel, to Dad, and back to Gator. Dad was still in the doorway, leaning against the wall and I could see his unwillingness to be a part of the situation in his eyes.

"Why don't you guys go put the parade on?" Mom said. "You might be able to see Greg. For Christ's sake, Gary, unglue yourself from the wall and get glued to the TV. You can manage that, I think."

Dad turned without a word and turned on the TV, but not to the parade. I heard Christmas music and I wondered for a moment why networks played Christmas movies on

Thanksgiving and why no one made Thanksgiving movies to play over and over again on Thanksgiving day.

“Gwendolyn?” Mom said.

I focused on her eyeliner, which she’d borrowed from my purse earlier in the day. The “dah” in my mother’s pronunciation of my name felt like a bee sting instead of its usual little love tap.

“Honey, try to be nice. It’s Thanksgiving.”

“I know.”

“Gator didn’t tell anyone he was bringing someone, just that he had a surprise. Your father didn’t know either.”

“It’s fine.”

“You would think he would have mentioned that he was seeing someone, at least to you, but you know how he is. Gator loves a surprise.”

It was true. Gator threw himself a surprise party one year because he knew he could do it better than anyone else could. He gave me a chinchilla for a birthday gift one year and it was pregnant—surprise!

“Where’s Mark?” I asked.

Mark had a way of being invisible among the rest of us unless he wanted to be a part of things. When he was a baby we would gear up for family trips to the beach or the mall and be out the door before someone remembered that Mark was still floating back and forth in his baby swing, so quiet, so unobtrusive. It was only recently that he began “acting out,” as Mom said, like with the fork in the ceiling. A result of puberty. Inevitable.

“He’s in his room, I’m sure,” Mom said.

I hadn’t helped at all with the potatoes and she didn’t seem to notice. I thought about telling her about the man and his cat over by the bank, but I knew she wouldn’t get it and the TV wasn’t loud enough for us to talk about Gator and his surprise without being overheard.

I set the table, but I didn’t actually know the right place settings for things. It had never mattered in the past. Our family wasn’t the kind to eat with three forks and we usually used paper napkins, even on the holidays when we had our nice family dinners. I knew my mother well enough to know that she’d want to impress Gator’s surprise with linen napkins, so I checked her old family hutch to see if I could find any and I did. They were orange with little appliqué turkeys, from the after-Thanksgiving sale at the craft store at least nine years ago. I remembered begging Mom to buy them because those little appliqué turkeys were so cute. They were still cute, but work, wrinkly, even though we never used them. I smoothed them out against the wall and folded them the best I could.

“Table looks nice, Gwenny,” Gator said, coming from the living room.

“Thanks.”

“Sad that Greg isn’t coming this year, huh?”

“Not really.”

“Yeah, not really. He’s probably happier with his camera and Garfield and Dudley Do-Right.”

“I don’t think Dudley Do-Right is in the Macy’s parade. He’s Canadian.”

“Canadian?”

“Yeah, Canadian. They don’t have the same Thanksgiving.”

“Huh. Who would even know that?”

I shrugged. Gator and I never bantered like that. We had a different level of banter that normally went beyond that kind of polite chatter. We never talked about Greg or Mark. We talked about our parents sometimes, usually only after holidays, and briefly. We had an understanding.

“What did you want to tell me before?” Gator asked.

“Nothing.”

“Tell me.”

“I forgot.”

“You didn’t forget. What’s the problem, Gwen?”

“I don’t have a problem.”

“Hey,” he said. “I really like this girl, Gwen. Her parents decided to pack up and have their Thanksgiving in Paris and they didn’t get her a ticket. She’s an only child. So, I invited her to eat with us.”

“I didn’t know France had Thanksgiving,” I said. I folded the last turkey napkin and looked at my brother. He looked like himself, but different. He looked like our dad, I realized. I wondered if I’d started to look like our mom without even noticing it.

“Listen,” Gator said. “I have something I want to tell you, but only you, no one else, okay?”

“Sure,” I said.

Dad came in the room and peered at my place settings.

“Look at those napkins. Good job, Gwenny! Isn’t that something?” He smiled so broadly that I pitied him. He tried so hard.

Mom yelled for us to help get the food on the table and walked out of the kitchen to bang on Mark’s door. I carried a tureen of pearled peas and went back for the butter. Dad got the turkey and Gator showed off by balancing several dishes on his arms. Rachel sat to the side and leaned in close as I passed by. Her breath was hot and smelled like cigarettes.

“What can I help with?” she asked.

“Nothing, we got it,” I said.

Mom returned with a sulking Mark and motioned for everyone to sit down.

As part of our tradition, we all filled up our plates quickly and let the food overlap. Rachel sat politely, hands folded on her lap. I could tell she was making Mom uncomfortable. She doesn’t like to serve people their food.

“Help yourself, dear,” she said.

“Doesn’t this all look great? This looks great, Sarah. Smells great too,” Dad said, already holding a buttered biscuit. Mark was sculpting his mashed potatoes. Gator’s utensils were ready for action. Rachel sat with a frozen smile.

Mom waved her hand. My brothers and I knew this was the signal to start eating, so we did. Rachel picked up her fork and took a delicate bite. She was sitting next to Gator, in my usual spot, closer than I thought could possibly be comfortable for two people to eat. I was sitting in Greg’s spot.

Gator broke the silence.

“Gwenny told me she had a story to tell me, but then she forgot.”

I put a big bite of sweet potato in my mouth and it burned my tongue. The potatoes needed salt.

“What’s the story, kiddo?” Dad asked.

“It’s nothing, it was stupid,” I said.

“Gwen, just tell the story already,” Gator said. His eyes glued to mine. Pleading.

I sighed. Mark had started to eat his potato mountain and was on his second glass of Coke.

“When I was walking to the store I saw a homeless man with a cat on a leash.”

“A cat on a leash? How do you put a cat on a leash?” Dad asked.

“What does a homeless man need with a cat?” Mom said.

“What else?” Gator asked.

“What do you mean what else?” I said. “That’s what happened. I was walking to the store and I saw a homeless man with a cat on a leash.”

“That’s it?”

I looked at Rachel, who was still smiling, still taking polite bites with her right hand. Her left hand was to her side, holding my brother’s right, I realized.

“That’s it,” I said. “I thought it was cute.”

“Ah,” he said. “Well that’s cool.”

Rachel smiled.

“Gator said he had something to tell me too, but he didn’t get to yet,” I said.

Rachel smiled at Gator and he shot me a look I couldn’t read.

“No, it’s nothing,” Gator said. “Not a big deal.”

“Come on, Gator, I told my story, why don’t you tell yours?” I said.

Rachel looked at him expectantly. Her hair hung around her body like a blanket. He shook his head and I could tell she was squeezing his hand under the table.

“We can tell them, Gabe,” she said. I hated her for calling him by the wrong name.

“I don’t think now is the time,” he said.

“Are you getting married?” our mother gasped. She looked dizzy.

“Oh, no,” Rachel said. She let go of Gator’s hand and put it on her stomach. “We’re having a baby.”

Mom and Dad stopped eating and stared at Gator. Gator stared at me. Mark kept eating and slurped his soda. Gator turned to Rachel and smiled.

I knew I’d lost him.

I folded my turkey napkin and got up without excusing myself. No one protested. No one wanted to be the one to ruin the dinner this year. They let me do it.

I took Mom’s car keys and drove back to the bank lot, to the man and his cat.

When I got there, there was just the empty can of turkey in gravy sauce licked clean.

MATCHBOOK BABY

My mother died on a Tuesday in the house I grew up in. It was a house, not big or small, just a house; I couldn't tell you the measurements. We had painted the house a muddy yellow several years back. The paint was called Sunset West on the can, but my mother called it Dirty Canary when all was said and done. A few days before she died she muted the television and took my hand in hers. She took a long drag of her cigarette. She didn't look at me.

"Be careful of walking into churches, Amos. You could burst into flames."

My mother had a way of saying things like this, suddenly and clearly, and whether or not the things she said made sense, those kinds of warnings always filled me with a panicky sort of anxiety. What if I did burst into flames? I never thought of my mother as a liar. I never had a reason to believe she was wrong; she was, in fact, the most truthful person I knew.

My mother said I was a matchbook baby. It wasn't until I was older that I learned a matchbook baby wasn't a real thing and that she had just named me after a book of matches branded with the name Amos. She liked Amos brand matches and didn't know anyone named Amos. For her, it was that simple.

"A name doesn't mean much half the time anyway," she'd say. Her own name, Beatrice, was not a beautiful one, although she was undeniably beautiful. "Put together," people said. "Classy."

Growing up with the name Amos has its ups and downs. I never knew another Amos; there was never another Amos in any of my classes at school, like there were Michaels and Christophers and Matthews. But there was the other Amos. The Famous one. My mother told

me she hadn't thought of it when she named me Amos, that there was a cookie company touting the same name.

"The matchbooks came first, I am sure," she said. "Besides, you can't expect me to keep up with every snack food the goddamn distributors come up with. How many different kinds are there now? If anyone is teasing you because you have the same name as a damn cookie man then you find a way to make fun of them back."

Unapologetic and without concern for cookies. That was my mother.

I met with a funeral director within 24 hours of my mother's death. There was no point in dragging out the inevitable. My mother hated time-wasters.

"Mister Porter, I'm very sorry to hear about your mother," the funeral director said. He was small, slight like a sparrow, and I couldn't decide if that was comforting or disconcerting. I think, given the situation, it would have been nice to have been taken care of by a beautiful woman or a burly man with a beard and a big grin. The funeral director's voice was soft and southern. Georgian, if I had to guess. His bird bones made me uncomfortable. He looked fragile and breakable, without even a commandeering voice to establish himself.

"What have you heard about her?" I asked. My mother would have liked that. The undertaker's spotted hands unfolded and he drew them in to rest on his knees. A wedding band wound around his ring finger and curly black hairs rounded over the gold. "Who would marry a goddamn undertaker?" I imagined my mother saying. "Especially that one. Honestly?" I looked at him. His face was pockmarked, eyebrows unkempt, but he was clean-shaven and his

tiny wire-rimmed glasses framed his tiny, pointy face in a way that almost made him grandfatherly, but not quite.

When I was young, or when we were young, as she would say, my mother and I would sit on the back porch of the Dirty Canary house before it was painted Dirty Canary. We'd grill hamburgers and chicken and halved peaches, sprinkled with cinnamon and sugar, which caramelized on the fruit. My mother would throw iceberg lettuce in a mixing bowl with olive oil and salt and call it a salad. I drank Coca-Cola Classics. She drank German Riesling. We kept up this tradition for as long as she was alive and it was only a few years ago that my mother pointed at the dying barbeque, its coals still glowing orange.

"When I die, just throw me on the barbeque, Amos. Nothing fancy, okay? Just some A1 and pepper. And kosher salt."

When I was much younger and she said things like that, I had been horrified. By that time, though, I'd realized my mother's sense of humor.

"Mom, good meat doesn't need A1."

She laughed and refilled our glasses. I laughed too, but it was then that I realized my mother wasn't immortal.

"She wanted to be cremated," I said. I said it firmly. At least I tried. I closed my eyes. "Don't let him bully you, Amos," my mother whispered.

The funeral director offered a smile. A bird beak smile. "Unpleasant," my mother said. "Goddamn creepy."

“Perhaps you should take a day or two, consider all of your options,” he said. Smile.

“What options? What’s to consider?”

“Well,” he said, “your mother died naturally. It might be easier for you to say goodbye if you had a nice open casket viewing. That way you and the rest of your family could bid farewell.”

Naturally. Goodbye. Family. Died.

“Listen to all those words, Amos,” my mother said. “He’s trying to get the best of you.”

“My mother wanted to be cremated,” I said. I noticed the funeral director wore black shoes with brown pants.

When I was 13 I had to have two teeth pulled. They were baby teeth that never fell out and the dentist said they had to go. My mother readily agreed but I was a harder sell.

“What if I bleed to death?” I asked.

“For Christ’s sake, Amos, don’t be morbid,” she said.

“It can happen, you know.”

“No, it cannot. It will hardly hurt. It will feel like a cigarette burn.”

My mother, always careful, had never burned furniture, or me, with a cigarette.

“Can I try it?” I asked.

“Try what?”

“Can I feel a cigarette burn? So I know what to expect?”

“Well,” she said, “I wouldn’t want to waste one.”

“I’ll smoke it after I try it,” I said.

“I’d rather you didn’t, it’s a nasty habit, Amos.”

My mother was anything but nasty, with her smart red blouses and fitted dark blue jeans, polka-dotted dresses and high heels. Her face was always made up and topped off with black mascara. She smelled sweet, like oranges and nicotine, but never like smoke.

“I’d rather not have my teeth pulled,” I said.

She laughed. She said when I was a smartass, I reminded her of her. She handed me a cigarette, a Virginia Slim, and cupped her hand around the end while lighting it.

“Everything beautiful burns, Amos,” she said.

I pressed the cigarette to my forearm and gasped. It singed the hair and left an angry red circle. After a few days it scabbed and yellowed and was edged with black. It itched.

I brought the cigarette to my lips and sucked in the smoke. I had always imagined that it would be like breathing in the smoke my mother blew in the other direction, but instead it burned my throat and threw me in a fit of coughing. I dropped the cigarette and my mother pounded on my back. The coughing embarrassed me. She picked the cigarette off the floor and smoked the rest of it.

I left the funeral parlor, after arguing with the director over satin pillows. He talked me into it and I had agreed on a casket called “The Socrates.” She’d get a kick out of that. The Socrates was made with solid pine and had a white cotton bed inside with a half-couch. In case my dead mother needed to lounge, I supposed. I wrote him a check for \$1,895.00 and he shook my hand, glad we had finally agreed on how my mother should rest for all of eternity.

In the third grade, a kid named Shane Crowley picked his nose and wiped it underneath my desk. I hit him. He hit me back. In minutes we were on the floor, tumbling and punching. Our teacher pulled us apart and sent another student to get the principal. While we were waiting, Shane leaned close and whispered with hot breath right in my ear.

“My mother says your mother is a whore and you’re a bastard.”

At the time I didn’t know what a whore or a bastard was. I only knew the standard swear words. But I knew they were bad and I knew how I’d find out what they meant.

When I got home from school that day my mother was half-heartedly dusting and moving books from the coffee table to shelves. She was listening to Johnny Cash on the record player.

“Don’t you love Johnny Cash, Amos? I love his voice. So deep. It’s manly. Don’t you love him?”

“Yes, I love him,” I said. “Are you a whore?”

She paused, and then looked at me, but she wasn’t angry. Angry didn’t suit her face, she would say. She moved a book about John F. Kennedy on top of my favorite *National Geographic*, which had pictures of naked women in it.

“I guess I am, but not like I used to be.”

“What’s a whore?”

“A woman who has sex with a lot of different men.”

“You do that?”

“Sometimes, but not as much as I did before you were born.”

“Am I a bastard?”

She laughed and her never-ending cigarette glowed.

“More or less,” she said. “Where did you pick that up?”

“Shane Crowley said his mother told him.”

My mother threw her head back with laughter.

“She’s one to talk!”

I puked on the morning of the funeral. Casserole. I tried to write a eulogy, but everything came out sounding damp and moldy. I’d been drinking Pepto Bismol straight from the bottle since my mother died. She didn’t like that. “Don’t ever drink anything pink, Amos, for crying out loud. You’re a man,” she insisted, but I ignored her. She was still angry about the casket. The funeral director met me at the door and clasped my hand gently. His eyes, I noticed, were brown, liquid and crimson tinted, like he had stayed up late the night before like I did.

“How’re you, Mister Porter?” he asked. Porter was my mother’s maiden name. I never knew my father or his name. My mother only mentioned him to me once. I never asked. It was a quick mention on a long car ride to the beach. We passed a man selling boiled peanuts on the side of the road. I was 17.

“Your father loved boiled peanuts, you know.”

I didn’t know. I didn’t know anything about him at all. I never asked because by the time I was old enough to realize that I should have a father, I knew my mother well enough to know if she wanted to talk about him, she would bring him up. I was right. I choked on my own spit when she said it and she turned the radio up, loud, and sang along to Gloria Gaynor’s “I Will Survive.”

“How are you, Mister Porter?” the funeral director asked again. I considered the question. I’d had better days. The weather was nice.

“I’m here,” I said.

He nodded and flapped for me to come inside.

“Do you want to put your things down? I can put them in a safe place for you and you can collect them—after,” he said.

“No,” I said. “No, thank you. My mother gave me this bag. You understand?”

“Of course,” he said.

I kept my duffel bag close. It was leather and brown and I bought it from the Good Will several years ago. My mother never saw it. “Way to use a dead woman, Amos,” she said.

“Real nice. What’s in the bag?” I didn’t answer.

The funeral was packed. More people showed up than I’d expected. All of her friends from the different jobs she had had while I was growing up—the ladies from the diner, the ladies from the department store, the ladies from the hospital, they were all there. A lot of men were there, ones I recognized and ones I didn’t. Frank didn’t show. I knew my mother really liked Frank and Frank didn’t like me. He called me “funny” and told my mother to cut me loose.

“It’s not natural, Beatrice, for a boy to be so dependent on his mother,” he said one night over my mother’s homemade paella.

“It’s really none of your business, Frank,” she said. “It’s really not.”

“He’s old enough to live on his own. Does he even like girls? What’s wrong with him?”

“He likes girls, Frank, and if he didn’t it wouldn’t be any of your business,” my mother repeated and took his plate away.

“It might not be your fault, Bea, but maybe it is. Kick him out of the nest. Let him flap his little wings.”

She poured herself a glass of wine. She didn’t offer to refill Frank’s. I watched this happen from the top of the stairs. I never saw Frank again.

In college, I dated a girl for a short time; her name was Cynthia and she was interested in anthropology, which I didn’t know anything about. We met in a general mathematics class and I asked her out for coffee. My mother told me that coffee was less threatening than drinks and more interesting than the movies. I didn’t like to drink anyway. Cynthia and I had a lot of coffee and some movies and a few dinners over a few months, and then she said she wanted to have sex.

“Just do it,” my mother told me.

“What if I don’t do it right?”

“Most men don’t. She’s young though, she probably won’t know the difference.”

I hesitated.

“I have faith that you can figure this one out, darling. The mechanics of the thing. You know what to do. It really should just come naturally.”

Cynthia was pretty in a common way. She had ironed clothes and hair. She wore pink blush on her cheeks and at night she wore pink blush that shined. She got quiet with me after we tried sex a few times.

“She was boring anyway,” my mother said when I told her Cynthia told me it wasn’t going to work out. “I didn’t care for her.”

I didn't want to say anything during the funeral—my mother had always been the talker between the two of us. I tried to write the eulogy but everything sounded hokey and I figured I could just as well wing it. “Don't bore them, Amos,” my mother said. “Nobody likes a snoozer.”

Some of the women got up and blubbered into the microphone, blubbered about how “Beatrice was the funniest” and “Beatrice was so proud of her boy, Amos, and how smart and handsome he is” and “Beatrice worked harder than anyone.” When it was my turn I got up to the microphone and stared out into the faces of my mother's friends and her acquaintances and surely, some people who didn't really like her, but showed up for the spectacle.

I cleared my throat. Feedback from the microphone made everyone cringe. I wondered whose idea it was to have a microphone at a funeral. My mother was rolling her eyes.

“My mother,” I started, and swallowed hard. “My mother was no ordinary woman. I'm sure that anyone who knew her knew that she loved life and that she was beautiful. And, I loved her a lot.”

At the sound of my own voice echoing back at me, I became aware of how stupid I sounded.

“My mother said I was a matchbook baby, because she named me after Amos brand matches. That's just the kind of person she was.”

Everyone stared. Someone coughed.

“My mother said everything beautiful burns. I think she would really appreciate everyone being here today.”

I stopped and nodded and removed myself from the microphone quickly. Someone took my place and said something about appetizers and drinks after the burial. The funeral director stood at the door and waited for the guests to file out. I had asked him to have Johnny Cash playing while everyone left. “Good choice,” my mother said.

“Can I have a moment alone with her?” I asked him, gesturing to the casket.

“Of course, of course,” he squawked. I had to give him credit for being so agreeable.

I had packed several bottles of cheap wine in my duffel bag. I got the idea when I saw Amos brand matches at the gas station. I hadn’t known that they still made them.

I poured a glass for her and one for me. Red wine, a Cabernet I think, and after I drained my own glass I poured hers inside the casket. It stained the white half-couch a beautiful mahogany red as it splashed the sides, and I emptied all of the bottles for good measure. The wine rolled over my mother’s powdery skin and absorbed into the blue and white polka-dotted dress I had chosen for her to wear. It was the same one she had worn to my college graduation four years earlier. I felt sad that she spent so much money on a dress and only got to wear it twice.

The flames licked and hissed at the lacquered coffin and I jumped back from the heat. They spread faster than I’d expected. The funeral director rushed in, yelling something awful, flapping his skinny arms, and I lit a cigarette with one of the programs that caught a bit of the fire.

Somewhere, my mother clapped and laughed, good and hard.

OH, THE GRANDIOSITY!

We met in a cemetery, not a graveyard. Who knew there was a difference? According to James, they don't make graveyards anymore. Something about lack of space and a higher percentage of infectious diseases spreading to the townspeople. Cemeteries took over a long time ago, supposedly.

I went for the silence. I had a few grandparents buried there, my mother's mother and father, and my father's father. My living grandmother laughed when I told her I visited my grandfather's grave sometimes, and then she asked if I had a boyfriend. When I told her I didn't she smiled, satisfied, proud even, and told me to keep up the good work. "You're better off," she said on more than one occasion. I never argued.

I didn't really go to visit my dead grandparents, though; I really just went for the silence. My late nights in the cemetery sparked thinking that I couldn't manage at work, with the complaining co-workers who never seemed to have enough time to meet deadlines, but always had plenty of time to discuss last night's episode of whatever. It sparked thinking I couldn't manage at home either, with the TV always playing whatever, with everything there was to organize and clean, and the cat, in his lazy, entitled way constantly parking himself on whatever I was reading, eating, or cleaning and leaving tufts of fur in his wake, signs of his claims.

I never brought my phone to the cemetery because it seemed rude. I liked to walk around the tombstones and see what kinds of flowers people left for their loved ones. Roses were the most common. I saw lilies a lot too. People didn't often get creative with their flowers. Sometimes I would see irises or marigolds. I always felt embarrassed for the marigolds, so

uncomfortable in their cheeriness, the out of place orange screaming against the grays and browns and dirt of the tombstones. Obscene in their way.

I heard the crunch of his boots on the trimmed grass before I actually saw him.

Disconcerting.

“Smells like snails, eh?” he said.

My shoulders stiffened. I was crouched in front of a tombstone that belonged to Murray Goldstein, 1929-1996, Beloved Father and Husband. There were no flowers on his grave. Poor Murray.

I turned to see who the voice belonged to. He was standing a few feet away, wrapped up in a down jacket the color of lentils and he smiled through a five o'clock shadow.

“Smells like, snails, huh?” he said, louder.

I stood up, slowly, and balanced my legs. I looked him up and down. I didn't think I could outrun him if I needed to. My short legs were never much for running. I never was athletic.

“What?” I said, louder than I intended.

“It always smells like snails here.”

“What do snails smell like?”

“Like a cemetery I guess. Sweet and dirty. Right?”

I sniffed the air. It did have a sweetness to it, a familiar smell that I couldn't quite place, but also earthy. Dirty.

He took a few steps closer and pulled his empty hands out of his pocket. He wrapped himself in a hug and rubbed his arms a few times. It was chilly out.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you. I thought it would be better if I said something. I didn’t want you to see me lurking around and to be afraid.”

“I’m not afraid,” I answered too quickly.

He came closer and extended a hand.

“I’m James,” he said.

I shook his hand and tried to ignore the flip in my stomach. I had had a James before. A missed connection. My James and I had been best friends, the kind you see in the movies and root for, who always inevitably end up together. We did everything together, down to weekly trips to the farmer’s market, the beach, matinees, breakfasts, and late night bottles of wine. I cooked for him and we’d eat dinner on the couch, watching reruns of sitcoms and old movies that had been edited for basic cable. “Shit” replaced by “shoot,” “fuck” replaced by “freak,” “bitch” replaced by “jerk.” Sometimes an “asshole” would sneak in unnoticed by anyone but us. When I didn’t cook, we’d eat out; we had our regular places where the wait staff knew us as a pair and would bring my iced tea and his Coke without our having to place the order. I gained about fifteen pounds in the two years James and I spent filling in time for each other. Everyone, including me, assumed we would have our When Harry Met Sally moment sooner rather than later, but no one clued him in, and I found out he was the only one out of the loop when I introduced him to a friend I’d had in college, a plain girl with a puppy’s eagerness to please, who was supposed to observe James and me together and give me her honest opinion of us as a pair. It didn’t work out that way. I hadn’t spoken to either one of them in over a year. The last I’d heard, they were moving in together. If this had been in a movie, people would have demanded their money back. Our mutual friends politely avoided ever bringing up his name with me. The

friends who took my side in the situation badmouthed them both. The ones who were indifferent or oblivious faded away with him.

The James in front of me had cold hands, and I noticed then that it was unusually brisk out for April in Florida. The normal dampness that hangs in the air in our early spring was absent; it was cool and crisp instead. James held onto my handshake for a few seconds longer than would normally be comfortable for the situation.

“Anna,” I said.

“You have a strong handshake, Anna,” he said.

“I used to practice,” I said, and wondered why I shared that with him. My father made me practice my handshake with him starting when I was sixteen. It was a condition for getting a driver’s license, one of many: get a part time job, maintain straight A’s, be responsible for walking the dog in the mornings and in the rain, and develop a solid handshake. “It’ll help you in life. You’ll thank me,” my father had said at the end of every practice session. I had gotten every job I’d ever interviewed for. Result of the handshake? “It can’t hurt,” my father said.

“Well, seems like the practice paid off,” James said. He knelt in front of Murray Goldstein’s tombstone and squinted at the careful lettering.

“Relative?” he asked.

“No.” I said.

“Who are you here for?” he asked.

“My grandparents,” I said, guiltily grateful for their presence and the explanation.

“All of them?” he said.

“No, three. Both grandfathers and my maternal grandmother.”

“I’m sorry,” he said and he sounded sincere.

“That’s okay,” I said. It was a reflex. “Thank you,” probably would have been more appropriate. “Who are you here for?” I asked.

“Everyone,” he replied.

“Everyone?”

“Yeah. I like to come and visit everyone here who doesn’t get visitors. It just seems right, you know?”

“Yeah,” I said and I meant it.

James nodded toward Murray. He took a few steps back and moved to the next grave. I moved with him.

“Where are your grandparents?” he asked, and I pointed to where they were, a few yards from where we were standing.

“What were you doing all the way over here?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Just walking around.”

“Want to walk with me?” he asked. He started walking before I answered and I followed him.

James told me about the differences between cemeteries and graveyards over coffee at a greasy Denny’s. The waiter, exotically attractive, with coffee skin and bright, wide eyes that slanted with or without the help of eyeliner, doubled as a queen at the drag club on Druid Street that my old James and I used to go to sometimes for the drink specials. I recognized him from the gap in his teeth, and his nametag, which said, “Rick.” His drag name was “Ricki.” Not too creative, Rick.

New James ordered pancakes after having a cup of coffee. I resisted. “It’s too late for me to eat,” I said. The truth was I was trying to take off some of my old-James weight. I was surprised when, after the weeks of mourning the loss and drinking bad wine with whoever could stand to listen to my desolate babble, I got out of bed one morning and didn’t see myself in the bathroom mirror, but a bloated, scratched version of my face, my features blurred by excess, too many drinks, too many bowls of chips and salsa, too many pasta dinners, and batches of homemade cookies with old James. I had been watching what I put in my mouth since, and I reveled in the days I went with the bare minimum of food intake according to women’s magazines and the WebMD website. Small victories.

I liked the way new James buttered his pancakes, one pat for each cake. Rick, as he was to be referred to that night, refilled our coffee cups when necessary. He had no trace of makeup on his face. I wondered if he remembered my face, my enthusiasm for his show, the money I spent on White Zinfandel since they never stocked anything better at the drag club, or that he once told me, in the ladies room at the club, that Clinique made the best makeup remover and that “it’s what all the queens use, honey!” I wondered if he noticed that I was with a different James.

We talked about regular things. Our jobs. He did something with insurance. One of those jobs that has a title that doesn’t actually describe the job and he said he’d just bore me with the explanation. He said textbook editing sounded interesting. I told him it wasn’t. We talked about where we were from. “Atlanta,” he said with a hint of pride and I smiled. When I lost my old James, I had taken a road trip to Atlanta with a friend to get out of town for a few days. We did the touristy stuff: the Coke factory, the aquarium, and the museums. We ate soul food and

slept in in the mornings, swore at the bad traffic, and skipped out on going to the Georgia Zoo on the last day because of rain.

“I went to Atlanta for the first time last year,” I said. “I heard they had perspective there, so I went to get some.”

“Did you find any?” he said.

“A little.”

“I go fairly often,” he said. “My parents still live there and my sister lives outside of Marietta.”

“I’d go back,” I said, and then immediately realized that it sounded differently than I had meant it to. “I mean, you know, sometime.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I know.”

Rick started slacking on refilling the coffee, but it was for the best. I didn’t need more. My brain was beginning to separate from my skull and my legs ached. For me, being drunk and being tired felt the same. James insisted on paying for my coffee and paid a gray woman whose nametag was littered with holographic Looney Tunes stickers. Yosemite Sam’s gun obstructed the “l” in “Cheryl.”

I gave James my phone number in a rush, saying the numbers too quickly and too loudly. I didn’t hear from him within a reasonable time frame.

“Do you really want to date a guy you met in a graveyard?” my friend, Janelle asked when I whined about it.

“We met in a cemetery, not a graveyard. They don’t make graveyards anymore.”

“Since when?” she asked.

“I don’t know, since the 1700’s or something like that. Graveyards aren’t as sanitary as cemeteries.”

“Says who?”

“James told me.”

“Ha,” she said without laughing.

“Really. Google it.”

“Oh, I will.”

“Anyway, I don’t know, he just seemed like a nice guy. Is it so unbelievable to think that maybe he would have called?”

“No, it’s not unbelievable at all to have thought he would have, but he didn’t.”

“Yeah.”

“I just don’t want you to get hurt again. By another James.”

“Yeah.” The mention made my skin itch.

“Come on,” she said. “Don’t go getting all upset now.”

“I’m fine,” I said.

“You just don’t need another James fucking up your life. The last one wasn’t worth it.”

“I know.”

My thoughts were cluttering around the house and at work and even at the teahouse I went to sometimes to get away from home. They didn’t have one thing in their sweets case that looked remotely appetizing. All natural sugar, eco-friendly, vegan absurdity. Not even

tempting. All I wanted was to go to the cemetery, even for a half hour, to think. It was getting too loud. Janelle told me to find a new cemetery so I wouldn't have an awkward run-in with James. I found one that was a bit of a drive, thirty minutes outside of town. The stones were uniform at the new cemetery, and it seemed as though a flower ordinance had been passed there. Nothing fancy, just the standards. No marigolds, no irises, no zinnias, or belladonnas. Roses, lilies, orchids, and the cheap, rude carnations from those who want to save a few bucks for their morning coffee or another pack of cigarettes. The carnations were too abundant, the tombstones too light, the grass too marshy—I couldn't get into the new cemetery.

What did it matter, I thought, if I did run into him? We weren't anything. We took a walk around the cemetery and shared coffee at a Denny's. Rick the drag queen had served us; he brought us extra napkins and a little ceramic bowl of creamers and blue, pink, and yellow artificial sugar packets. We had talked about work and our hometowns and our pets, not our deepest secrets or wildest dreams or greatest fears. We were not, by any stretch of the imagination, a we.

I wanted my cemetery.

There were no cars parked in the lot at the cemetery and no signs of anyone else. It was a quarter of one in the morning. Dew dotted the stiff grass that I loved. The crunch of it under my feet jumpstarted my doughy brain. I did a lap around the grounds and paid a customary visit to my grandparents, so I could tell my mother I did the next time we spoke on the phone. Murray Goldstein still didn't have any flowers on his grave. I was ashamed for not bringing him any. My mother constantly urged me to grow herbs and flowers in the garden window that came with

my apartment at no extra charge, but I'm a plant killer. I could never keep them up. I'd considered myself lucky to have kept the cat alive for as long as I'd managed.

My head cleared in the night air, the silence only broken by my movements in the grass and the clink of the metal rings that attached my purse to its straps. I settled in the wet grass, spread my arms and legs wide, as if making a snow angel, and closed my eyes. I could sleep there in the cemetery, quieted amongst the different flowers and cool cement. Maybe I would sleep there.

"What are you doing?"

I opened my eyes and sat up quickly and simultaneously; a yelp caught in my throat, which had gone dry. It was a moment before my eyes readjusted to the low light of the street lamps that bathed the cemetery grounds. James stood over me, just like he had the night we met over Murray Goldstein's grave, in the same lentil-colored down jacket he wore that night, only it wasn't cold enough for it.

"I was just thinking," I said.

"You looked like you were sleeping."

"I wasn't."

"Don't you think it's kind of weird to lie down on someone's grave?"

"I'm not on anyone's grave," I said. I looked around. I was centimeters from Alma Mather, 1978-2006, Daughter. Poor Alma.

"You were close."

"I was just resting."

"That's okay," he said. "Hey, you want to see something interesting?"

“Okay,” I said and I followed him.

James led me past Alma and Murray and my Grandma and Grandpa Southerland to a large ivory headstone on the west side of the yard. It had an intricate ivy border and was engraved in delicate script. It said:

“Oh, The Grandiosity!”

“Wow,” I said.

“Yeah, no name, no date. It’s new,” he said.

“I like it.”

“Me too.”

“You never called,” I said. The words came out accidentally.

James crouched in front of the beautiful headstone and touched the script lightly.

“I know, I’m sorry.”

I sat in the grass next to where he crouched and watched his fingers trace over the words. On the exclamation point I drew my breath.

“Why didn’t you call?”

“I went to New Orleans,” he said. “To see the St. Louis above ground cemeteries.”

“Just to see them?”

“Yeah.”

“Any reason?”

He moved from crouching to sitting and our knees touched. I didn’t move.

“They bury their dead above ground, in vaults,” he said. “It’s incredible. Stacked one on top of another, and the vaults are virtually indestructible. People pay to go on tours there.” He stopped and stared at the tombstone, then shifted his gaze to me. His eyes were framed with lines that didn’t suit his otherwise smooth face. He still had a five o’clock shadow and I wondered if it ever grew out or was clean-shaven. His eyes were brown, like mine. Old James had green eyes. I decided I liked brown.

“But what’s really fucked is homeless people sleep in the empty slots that are waiting for new bodies. Some of them leave things in their spaces, cups from Burger King and beer bottles. And what’s more fucked is cops come around and shoo them out of there, or cart them off to jail for trying to get a full night’s sleep without getting rained on.”

“That is fucked,” I said.

“And people write messages on the vaults. Poetry, bullshit voodoo curses they pick up at the head shops in the French Quarter, stuff like that. Whatever you can imagine. And there are benches. Benches, for people to sit on and rest from a long day of exploring the cemeteries.”

I nodded. He looked back at the ivory headstone in front of us.

“They were beautiful though, the cemeteries,” he said. “The night after we met I got in my car and drove there for a few days so I could see them.”

“Mmmhmm,” I said, because I didn’t have a better answer.

“I almost called you,” he said, “to see if you would come with me.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I kind of wanted to do it alone.”

“Oh.”

“Do you get that?”

I thought about it for a moment and he didn't look at me expectantly or with purpose. His eyes were fixed on a place on my face above my eyes, probably on my deep-set forehead wrinkle, my “Fuck You” line as Janelle called it, or my “Old James” line as I called it. Same difference.

“I get it,” I said, and I did.

“Good,” he said and reached for my hand. His hand was warmer than it had been the first time we met. His fingers curled around mine, and they fit together nicely, like something you'd see in a movie. He closed his eyes and breathed in deeply.

“Smells like snails,” he said.

I wondered which James he would turn out to be in my life, if he would be worth it or not, or if anything was ever worth it at all. He squeezed my hand.

MERMAID GIRLS

During the month of October in 1987, we had a plan. It was a good one. We were seven, and we decided we would be mermaids for Halloween. It was foolproof. Her mother had a sewing machine and crafted a beautiful pearlescent mermaid's tail for her. It shimmered turquoise and purple and had perfect little fins on the end. The fins were so perfect, so real, that I thought Ruby could probably jump into the ocean or the community swimming pool and be mistaken for a real mermaid. She had a sparkly purple bikini top and her long straw-colored hair was set in waves to complete the look. My mother, a charge nurse at the downtown hospital, fashioned my mermaid costume, too. She used poker table top felt from my father's game nights and made a forest-green mermaid tail with matching green flaps stapled to the end. I wore my red tank-style bathing suit top with green shell-shape cut-outs sewn on the chest and my dark hair half up-half down.

Looking back on the photos of Ruby and me in our handmade mermaid costumes, I realize I was the prettier one, despite the deafening beauty of her costume. I also realize what it took for my mother to put that costume together for me. At the time, though, I was ashamed of myself and my family and my poker-felt fins and I picked up on the differences in the compliments we got on our costumes that night. Our plan had failed me. It wasn't a plan so much as a game and Ruby had won that night, and would continue to do so. Her family moved to the West Coast before Halloween, 1988. Without her, I trick-or-treated with my younger brother and through the years I was a clown, a princess, a hobo, Cousin Itt from the Addams Family and Cleopatra before I decided I was too old for trick-or-treating and gave it up entirely.

Kids don't seem to trick-or-treat anymore. I hear that parents take their kids to malls to trick-or-treat now, because it's safer. I think it's a shame.

I graduated pharmacy school a year early and got a job with a 24-hour pharmacy with excellent benefits. In the name of fairness, we alternated who did overnights on a bi-weekly basis. I met Geoff on one of my Saturday overnights. He was getting a prescription filled for a herpes-complex anti-viral. No judgment here. He had beads of sweat forming on his upper lip and tapped his foot nervously while waiting for me to fill the order. It was 1:18 in the morning.

"You want to look at this magazine while you wait?" I said.

He was making me nervous. His foot stopped and he got up from the chair and took the *Men's Health* that a regular who picks up her diabetes medicine left rolled up next to my register. I've asked her not to roll the magazines. She says she's old as if it's an excuse. I went back to counting his pills and he rifled through the pictures in the magazine, not bothering to read the articles. He gasped something painful and it made me lose count. I poured the bottle out to start over. I glanced up and saw him clutching his left side with one hand, eyes closed with the magazine slack in his other hand.

"I'm trying to hurry for you," I said.

"No hurry, take your time," he said and tried to straighten up. He didn't let go of his side.

"Shingles, eh?" I said.

"How did you know?"

"You're not clutching your crotch."

He laughed a little and sat up even straighter. I finished counting and motioned for him to come back to the register. After correcting his address in the system, he paid, and nodded at me with appreciation. I read the *Men's Health* and filled an order for amoxicillin for the next hour until my shift was over.

The Sunday night shift told me he came back at the same time the next night asking for me. She gave him my schedule. He came in during my next overnight and asked if he could buy a Hershey's bar at the pharmacy and if he could take me to a movie. He said the shingles cleared up. We saw a zombie film. We've kind of been dating ever since.

On a Chinese take-out night, Geoff ate General Tso's while getting question after question wrong during *Jeopardy*. I had finished my vegetable lo mien and spring rolls and was silently answering a good percentage of the questions in my head while going through the mail. Regular mail, no bills, a Victoria's Secret catalog, coupon mailers, another threat from the car dealership claiming to be the very last notice about an extended warranty—that kind of stuff. In between the catalog and a coupon mailer was a small off-white envelope, kind of a mix of cream and beige. My name and address were scripted in neat purple ink and I didn't need to look at the return address to know who it was from. I knew the handwriting as well as I knew my own, if not better. Sometimes, while writing a letter or filling out a form, I'd remember being in the third grade, trying hard to practice my handwriting late at night, after my parents and brother had gone to bed. I'd put the little nightstand light on and hold a notebook on my lap and go over the alphabet again and again. The practice was in vain, and "my handwriting" is still my go-to answer for the "What's your greatest weakness" question job interviewers love to ask.

“Hey, I got something from Ruby,” I said to Geoff, who was slurping wonton soup directly from the Styrofoam cup. The cup squeaked on his teeth and sent a chill down my back. I never liked Chinese food very much.

“Oh yeah?” he said. He diverted his attention back to Alex Trebeck and I noticed for the third time that week how thin his hair was getting at the crown of his head and all the freckles on the back of his neck. They made me kind of sick.

It was a wedding invitation, with a handwritten letter tucked inside. The invitation itself was printed on the same off-white-beige-cream cardstock with a birds-of-paradise design embossed in silver on the front. The inside announced the wedding of Ms. Ruby Dianna Johnson to Mr. Taylor James Bunte. Ruby Bunte? It didn’t sound good to me. The whens and wheres were printed inside the card as well. I set it aside to read the letter. It was short and written in the same perfect purple script:

Ash-

Can you believe it?! I’m so excited! You have to come and bring that guy you’re dating too. You get a plus one. I need you to be my Maid of Honor—I wouldn’t have anyone else. Write or call when you get this! I miss you!

Love Always,

Ruby

Geoff wasn’t paying attention to me while I read and re-read the letter. I folded it up neatly into eight small straight squares and tucked it back inside of the beautiful wedding invitation. I went to the closet and pulled out my shoebox of letters and cards I had received from Ruby over the years. We had always been good about keeping in touch and still exchanged

letters here and there. I opened the box and put the invitation on top of the others and then I took it out again and set it aside. I dug to the bottom of the box and pulled out a few yellowed letters. During the first few years we would attach stickers to our letters. I would search high and low for the perfect sticker each time, sometimes saving special ones for special occasions, like Ruby's birthday or the Fourth of July. On her ninth birthday I used my favorite unicorn sticker on her birthday card and felt guilty for feeling a pang of remorse over giving it away after my mother put a stamp on and dropped it in the blue mailbox with the electricity bill and mortgage payment. Ruby always sent me nice stickers. She knew animals were my favorite but she also decorated letters she sent with stars and hearts and spirals, all bordering around her nice handwriting. In those early years we wrote about how stupid and annoying our brothers were, what we got for our birthdays and Christmas, how much time we were getting to swim in the pool and how much we missed each other. During our teenage years it was all makeup and music and boys. In college it was school, work and guys. We had just gotten into the realm of discussing men and our careers. We still always signed, "I miss you" at the end.

"When's the wedding?" Geoff said. He was looking at the invitation I had set aside.

Jeopardy was over and *Wheel of Fortune* had started. It sounded loud.

"Oh. Doesn't it say in there?" I asked. Of course it did.

"Oh yeah," he said. "That's nice."

"Mmmhmm."

I flew out to the West Coast once when we were 15. Her parents paid for my plane ticket and I stayed for four days.

"Did I ever tell you about the time I went out to California to visit her?" I asked Geoff.

“Yeah, I think so. And that kid with the yo-yo tattoo tried to kiss you?”

“He succeeded, actually.”

The visit was a little awkward. We were into the same kind of music and the same kind of clothes, but different kinds of people. We hadn’t seen each other for eight years and we weren’t the mermaids anymore. Her parents let her drive in an old sedan even though she only had her learner’s permit. She said she was getting a brand new car when she got her real license.

During the first two days, we drove around and made small talk about our lives. I realized I only had a letter’s worth of stuff to say at first. We watched some TV, went to a movie, got ice cream at Baskin Robbins. She introduced me to her boyfriend, who was Asian and thin and had a pierced eyebrow that looked just this side of goofy on his smooth face. His name was Kent. I’d never had a boyfriend.

On the third night, Ruby and Kent took me to a bonfire on the beach where other kids they were friends with gathered around and threw sticks in the pit. Kent handed me a stick and motioned for me to chuck it in. I did. Ruby and Kent held hands and kissed and went to a big rock away from the water and the fire to be alone, even though everyone could see. I wanted to watch but I sat in the sand instead, close enough to the water to get small splashes on my feet, but far enough away to not soak my jeans.

A tall kid who I thought looked a little older sat next to me. He had the beginnings of a beard and uneven sideburns and he wore a baseball cap. I wrapped my jacket tighter around myself and smiled without showing my teeth.

“Hey,” he said. “You like to yo-yo?”

“Uh, I guess,” I said. I couldn’t think of anything clever.

He rolled up the sleeve on his right arm and flexed his forearm. He had a tattoo of a flaming yo-yo. I wish I was making that up.

“Three time yo-yo champion in the semi-finals in the Pacific Northeast,” he said.

“Oh. Really?” I said. I knew I sounded lame.

“Yeah, it’s something I used to just do for fun but then when I got good I realized I was onto something. I started competing locally and before you know it I could do this,” he said, standing up and pulling a plain black yo-yo out of his pocket. He quickly got it moving and did a series of tricks, none of which I knew the name for, besides Walking the Dog. My dad could do that one.

“Wow,” I said. “That’s really cool.”

“Yeah,” he said. “My name is Dennis.”

“Nice to meet you,” I said. “Ashley. I’m Ruby’s friend.”

“Oh, from Florida?” he asked. “She said she had a friend coming. That’s cool.”

I didn’t know what to do or say then or when he showed me more yo-yo tricks or when he kissed me with tongue. I liked a guy I went to school with and I had often imagined kissing him with tongue but I hadn’t done it. It was slippery and I had to wipe my chin.

Ruby and Kent came and sat in the sand with us when Dennis started showing me more yo-yo tricks.

“Having fun?” Kent said with a smile.

“Oh yeah, I was just showing Ashley this,” he said. “And this.”

All the tricks were starting to look the same to me and I felt like my mouth tasted like onions. Ruby was smiling at me and I rolled my eyes at her a little and hoped she’d take it as a

hint that I was ready to leave. When she finally got the hint Dennis rolled up his yo-yo and took my elbow.

“Can I get your number?” he asked. His face was too close to mine. I gave him the wrong number by one digit.

“Hope I see you again before you leave,” he breathed and then kissed me hard, with even more tongue than before. Kent clapped him on the back and Ruby wiggled her fingers at Dennis with a smile as she led me away.

“It was ridiculous,” I said to Geoff. “The kid smelled like onions and showed me a dozen yo-yo tricks that all looked the same.”

“Funny,” he said.

He picked up the Chinese take-out cartons and brought them to the kitchen. I could hear him rinsing them out in the sink and turning on the garbage disposal. I settled back into the sofa and looked at a letter Ruby had sent me not too long ago. It was dated in March. Her wedding was scheduled for September 15th. Two weeks notice. The letter from March that I picked up was the one where she described her new boyfriend, Taylor, to me. She said he was a surfer and he gave lessons and worked at a surf shop, too. He was tan and gorgeous and could surf better than some of the pros, according to Ruby. He would be pro if he could get some good waves like they have out in Australia, but he wanted to stay in town for awhile before making the move. It seemed fast to me. Geoff and I had started seeing each other not long after that letter and I knew we weren’t getting married. I didn’t even know how many more Chinese take-out/*Jeopardy* nights we had ahead of us. Little things were irking me. His short-sleeved button-down shirts with patterns seemed teenaged-looking to me and I noticed longer than acceptable

nose hairs more than once. A few weekends before, when we were going to bed, he dressed up in a Speedo as a joke to be funny and instead of making me laugh it caused a lump in my throat. It was a mixture of sadness and repulsion. I told him I had heartburn and couldn't do anything that night but go to sleep.

The next day I went back and forth with myself over calling to congratulate her and telling her I couldn't make it to the wedding. It felt weird. We hadn't seen each other since my visit all those years ago. I couldn't be her maid of honor. It was a ridiculous thing to ask of me. I was sure she had better friends than me around. I knew I had closer girlfriends, who knew more about me, who knew Geoff's name was Geoff and not "that guy" and who I would ask before I'd ask her if I was getting married.

She didn't pick up when I called. I called four times and left four separate messages asking for a call back. I sent an email and then another. No response. I booked a flight.

I forwarded my flight confirmation to her with a short note asking if she could pick me up from the airport and what to wear. She responded with an "Of course!" and a "whatever you want."

There was a period of time when we were a little younger that Ruby would disappear for awhile. Sometimes I wouldn't notice when I was busy enough with my own life, but then an occasion would pass or I'd be putting a stamp on a letter or a card and I'd realize it had been quite awhile since I'd heard from her. Once, I tried calling her in her dorm room during our first year of college and her roommate picked up. She said Ruby was having one of her "fits" and would give her the message when she came out of it. I never knew what her "fits" were. I can't

say why, but when Ruby would finally call me or write me, usually with fabulous news or big plans, I couldn't bring myself to ask her where she had been or what she had been doing.

My mother was thrilled to hear about the wedding and that Ruby picked me for her maid of honor. She was always happy that we kept in touch all those years.

"Mom, don't you think it's a little weird?"

"No, what's weird about it?"

"We have lived on opposite sides of the world since we were kids. She has to have better friends than me."

"You're exaggerating; you've lived on opposite sides of the *country* for years. Not the world."

"It might as well be the same thing."

"It's not and how could she have a better friend than you? You're wonderful."

"I just think it's weird."

I found a dress that I thought would work. It was knee-length and black with a sweetheart neckline. I bought fake pearl earrings to go along with it. Geoff told me I looked like I was going to a funeral.

"Black is the safest bet," I said. "She didn't tell me a color and I don't want to clash with anyone else. Black matches everything."

"Suit yourself. I think I've heard that you're not supposed to wear black to a wedding," he said.

"Too bad."

I didn't tell Geoff that he was invited. Traveling with him seemed like more than I could handle. He dropped me off at the airport and kissed me good-bye, as if I wasn't coming back in two days. He tasted like coffee with no sugar.

The flight made me tired and it made my skin dry. One of my ears wanted to pop, but wouldn't. I chewed gum.

I wandered around baggage claim looking for Ruby. I knew from our visit all those years ago that I would recognize her. At 15, we looked just like the seven-year-old mermaid girls in the picture. When I stepped off the plane that time, she was waiting for me at the terminal. I almost expected her in a mermaid's tail and bikini top, but she was wearing faded light blue jeans and an oversized school sweater. The face was the same. Mine was too.

A man with sun-colored hair to his shoulders tapped me on the shoulder.

"Ashley?"

"Yes?"

"Hey, I'm Taylor, Ruby's uh, fiancé," he said with a laugh. He hugged me, but I wasn't expecting it and I got one arm around him when he was already pulling away.

"Where's Ruby?" I asked.

"She's not feeling well, so she asked me to come pick you up."

"Not feeling well? The wedding is tomorrow."

"Yeah, she should come out of it."

Taylor took my bag and beckoned for me to follow him. Silently, we walked to a parking garage. He had to signal his car from a keyless entry remote a few times before we could find it. We buckled up and he navigated out of the dark garage, immediately pulling onto a highway

ramp. I didn't feel the need to talk and he didn't either, for a while. A generic rock radio station kept us entertained for a portion of the ride, but when the music stopped for a commercial break, he lowered the tuner and directed his attention to me.

"So, you and Ruby have known each other forever, huh?"

"Forever and a day," I said. "We met in preschool, on the playground. There were two toy ponies to sit on and we got them. When my mom heard I'd made a friend she bent over backwards to get Ruby's mom to let us have play dates and we eventually became inseparable."

"Were you weird or something?" he said.

"What?"

"Why was your mom so desperate for you to have Ruby as a friend?"

"Oh, no. I don't think I was really weird. Just shy."

"Oh."

The commercials ended and music came back on. I knew I should ask Taylor if he was excited about the wedding, the honeymoon, how he proposed, anything—but I felt like the right thing to do was listen to the music.

Ruby and Taylor lived in a high-rise a few blocks from the ocean. I had always wanted to live by the ocean. I thought of Geoff and his paleness. He burned in the sun. I always had to put sunscreen on his back but it never helped that much. Taylor took my bag and led me up the driveway, which was surrounded by flowers I didn't know the names of. He placed my bag in the foyer.

"Do you want something to drink?" he asked.

"No thanks," I said. "Is Ruby awake?"

It was a stupid question. He had been with me and there was no way for him to know. He rubbed the back of his neck.

“Uh, you know, I don’t know, but you’re welcome to go up and look in on her. It’s the first door on the right,” he said, jerking his thumb in the direction of the stairs.

The house smelled like bread and grass. I thought I could detect a hint of something else. Nicotine, maybe. It was hard to tell. The overall effect was homey and pleasant. I felt relaxed by it.

I walked up the stairs slowly and softly. I could hear that Taylor had turned on a TV in the living room and it occurred to me that it was the day before their wedding and they weren’t doing anything special. I thought people usually spent the night before their wedding apart, with their best friends or siblings or someone else to take care of them, to psych them up, to give advice and commiserate.

I knocked on the door and Ruby didn’t answer. I knocked again and opened it slowly.

Ruby was frozen over a suitcase on the bed, dressed in a red cocktail dress. It was short and shiny and looked out of place with the country-style bedroom furniture. She looked at me with wide eyes and I could see her eyes dilate and then focus on my face. Her shoulders seemed to relax as she recognized me and she motioned for me to come in and shut the door.

“Ashley,” she said. She flew toward me and grabbed me in a hard hug.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Ashley, I need your help,” she said.

“Help with what?” I said. Her eyes were moving wildly and were shining in the dim light. Her dress was hiked up on her thighs. I felt like pulling it down for her but I didn’t feel like we were at that level. She didn’t look like herself.

Ruby tossed a few pieces of clothing, what looked like underwear, in the small suitcase. It was black and decorated with bright polka dots. It looked like the kind of suitcase I would have picked out for myself.

“Ashley, I have to get out of here. I was waiting for you.”

“What? Why? What are you talking about?” I said. I was outside of myself. I didn’t know where I was or who I was talking to, even though I knew it was Ruby’s house and I was looking at Ruby.

“Meet me outside,” she whispered. “Go out the front door and tell Taylor you’re going for a smoke.”

“I don’t smoke though,” I said.

“He doesn’t know you.”

I can’t say why, but I listened to her. I walked down the stairs slowly, letting the wall guide me down. There were framed pictures on the wall, of Taylor and Ruby smiling at the beach, on a ski trip, in a park, the whole nine. I recognized older versions of Ruby’s parents smiling from a large gold-frame. At the end of the staircase a little table held pictures of kids. Nieces and nephews, what looked like Taylor as a baby, a picture of Ruby with her brothers at a water park—I remembered when they took that trip. I wanted to go so badly and I begged my mom to take my brother and me on the same day. She said we’d go another time because it was rude to infringe on someone else’s day out and that Ruby’s parents would have invited us if they

wanted us to come. We ended up going, long after Ruby's family had moved and I wrote her a long letter about it. The main focus of the letter was the super slide I was tall enough to ride, but that my brother wasn't. We had Sno-cones that day too.

Toward the back of the cluttered table, I saw mermaid fins. A beautiful shimmery pair next to a dull green pair. My green fin flaps hung over my pink jellies shoes limply. Ruby's fins weren't flaps at all, but perfect like I remembered them. We both smiled directly at the camera and we looked happy.

I moved to tell Taylor I was stepping out to smoke, but he was watching basketball and it felt obscene to interrupt him. I stopped for just a second and considered whispering to him to go outside to get Ruby but I couldn't. I opened and closed the door slowly and if he noticed he didn't mind.

Ruby had thrown her suitcase out the bedroom window and was climbing down an aluminum ladder that made me nervous. Her dress hiked up further and further and I looked away, not wanting to see more. She hopped off the last few steps and I noticed her flip flops, plastic and cheap, were completely mismatched with the short dress.

"Ruby, please tell me what's going on," I said. She was glancing over her shoulder and I wondered if she and Taylor were playing a trick on me.

"Ashley, I knew you'd come. I couldn't trust anyone else to help me with this."

"With what? What are you doing? What's going on?"

I felt panicked. I thought of Geoff and for a moment wished he was with me, because at least with Geoff I knew what to expect and what to get upset with and what to let go. Geoff was familiar.

“Ashley, I need to get away. I don’t want to get married. I never did. I’m meeting someone at the dock and we’re leaving.”

“We’re leaving?”

“Not you and me.”

“I don’t understand, Ruby.”

“I don’t have time to explain. We need to get down there.”

I can’t say why I followed her, but I did. We walked down street-lighted roads with Ruby’s suitcase dragging behind us. At one point we had to stop at a traffic light and Ruby looked at me. Her eyes were still shining. The look on her face made me wonder if she had just realized I was really there.

“Where’s your guy?” she asked.

“He didn’t come,” I said.

“Why?”

“I didn’t want him to.”

She nodded as if she understood completely and the walk sign flashed. We hurried across the street and were bathed in headlights from the cars on the other side of the road.

The dock wasn’t far and when we got there a motorboat was waiting. A man was inside who looked a little bit older than us. A wedding band glinted off his left hand in the moonlight.

“Ruby,” I started, but I had nothing to follow it with.

“Ashley, you’re a lifesaver,” she said.

“Why am I here?” I finally asked.

“I needed you,” she said. It was matter-of-fact.

“But why?”

“You’ve always been my friend,” she said.

“I know, but—were you planning this all along? Did you need me to come out here to help you escape from Taylor? Did he do something to you?”

The man in the boat had already taken Ruby’s suitcase and was starting the motor. She pulled her dress down a little, but not enough.

“Remember when we were kids?” she said.

“Yeah.”

“You were the only person on the playground I wanted to play with.”

I didn’t say anything.

“You were always the prettier one. I thought you’d get married first,” she said.

“I don’t get where you’re going with this,” I said.

She hugged me and then let the man take her hand to help her in the boat.

“I’ll write you,” she said.

“Ruby, I can’t just let you go,” I said. My voice sounded high and unnatural. It was like I was hearing my voice reverberating back to me, like when Ruby and I used to record ourselves on the cassette deck and then play it back. We’d host mock radio shows and sometimes let my brother or another girl who lived on my street guest star.

“I’ll write you,” she said again. The boat started rocking in the water and the man started the motor.

“What should I tell Taylor?” I shouted over the sound of the motor. It was too loud. She didn’t hear me, or she pretended not to. I couldn’t tell. When they had pulled a few feet from

the dock Ruby looked back at me and smiled. It was a small smile and in it I saw us at seven, mermaid girls forever, exactly where we belonged.

HOW WE TEND TO BE

I'm from one of those families where everyone is overly concerned with who got what from whom. I look like my mother, but I have my father's eyes, and I got my short legs from my grandmother. My grandfather was into Patsy Cline, which accounts for the fact that I like music. My other grandmother always wore red lipstick, which is why I wear too much makeup, and a great aunt, who I never met, had a penchant for dogs, which is why I turn my head when I see road kill.

I agreed to get my hair done with my mother for my cousin's wedding, a one-time thing, against my better judgment. It's her way of making me feel pretty.

"Melanie gets her cheekbones from her father's side of the family; we don't have those on my side," my mother explained to the hairstylist.

My entire existence, every move I make, every cup of coffee I drink, every cock of my eyebrow, every wasteful dollar, every word I say, can somehow be explained by my family tree. They've got it all figured out.

June is one of the worst possible months to have a wedding, in my opinion. The air gets so wet with humidity that breathing becomes an exercise, rather than a natural occurrence. My cousin, Renee, planned her wedding for the middle of June. The one-year anniversary of their first date. No one in the family seemed to be concerned that Renee had only been with the guy, who she met on the internet, for one year to the day. I tried to imagine how my mother would react if I announced a wedding to a guy I'd known for less than a year.

“Spontaneity,” she would say, “you must get that from my Uncle Charlie, who was in the Navy. He used to jump ship to impress girls on the docks. Now, reckless endangerment—you get that from your father.”

Renee picked a terrible dress for her bridesmaids, a light brown, tea-length, satin one that she called Café au Lait. Café au Lait sounded nice to me. Café au Lait. Coffee with milk. In a cup, café au lait is everything you need it to be. On a dress, it looked like shiny dog shit.

Renee got her bad fashion sense and color blindness from our fathers’ Aunt Kathy, who wore purple and orange sweat socks with pink negligees around the house on Christmas Eve until the year she died. Renee and I were both four.

Russ, my best friend, didn’t want to go to the wedding with me. “It’s for the best,” my mother said, because his tattoos and hair made her nervous. “You just have to wonder what a man in his thirties is doing covered in tattoos like that.”

According to Russ, the tattoos were “a visual representation of accomplishments and failures.” He got the first one, a pinup girl in a cheesecake sailor outfit on his forearm the day after he turned eighteen at the urging of his older brother. He added a new one every three months or so. I liked them. It was like looking at one of those Magic Eye photos, where the harder you concentrated the more you could see. The colors swirled and melded together all over his body. I liked the contrast with my naked skin when we used to lie in bed together, our limbs braided like the antique tapestries my mother hangs in the living room of the house I grew up in.

I thought about marrying Russ here and there when we were younger, before I got it out of my head that he was anywhere close to the kind of guy I'd ever want to be married to. We definitely never talked about it. I just liked to picture what it would be like sometimes. I thought about it the first time we met. I was twenty-three and living alone for the first time. Russ had knocked on the door to my little one bedroom apartment and asked if I had seen his cat, a nasty old orange tabby named Bud, who slipped out while Russ brought groceries in. I hadn't, but I liked him immediately for owning a cat; sensitive and somehow, on him, manly with security. He spouted off his apartment number over his shoulder after thanking me and asking that I let him know if I came across the thing. A few days later I was driving home from work and I saw a fat orange tabby lying in a yard a few blocks from where we live, enjoying the sun and the buzz of leftover love bugs. I opened my car door and coaxed the cat inside. It came easily and purred in the backseat.

It wasn't Russ's cat. Bud had come home later the same day that Russ had knocked on my door.

"You committed grand theft feline," Russ said, laughing. He offered to come with me to deposit the cat I'd stolen back on the lawn where it came from.

I have a friend who says that great "How We Met" stories are the pinnacle of great relationships, and that those of us (them) lucky enough to have them can count on it all working out. She and her husband met at a Home Depot. He was trying to repaint his living room and asked for her help matching paint to the samples of carpet and slate tile he brought with him. To

hear them tell the story, you'd think they met at the end of the rainbow, with a leprechaun riding a unicorn and bearing a pot of lucky gold as their witness.

"You're going to marry that man," she told me when I told her about Russ and the cat theft.

"He's not my type," I told her. "He seems like he'd give me a headache." It was true. He was sly in his mannerisms, flippant, and unyielding in speech. I suspected a reality of insensitivity, masked on the surface with cat ownership and an easy laugh.

Russ found reasons to drop by and knock on the door after the cat thing. He'd stop by to ask if I needed him to help pull down the ivy growing on the side of the building. "It weakens the walls," he'd said. He'd come by to ask to borrow books, saying that he was trying to read more and noticed that I had a lot of them. At first I liked the attention, then I liked having him around, but his brashness, his pushiness, and the way he said whatever he wanted about anyone he wanted anytime he wanted, with no concern for feelings or social decency embarrassed me when we were in public together. He wasn't the kind of guy I could ever picture introducing to my parents, even though I eventually did, since he became such a fixture in my life. We got really close after Bud died. I helped him get the thing into a carrier and drove him to the Humane Society to have it put down. Bud had lost control of his bowels and wasn't eating anymore.

I was surprised when Russ moved in to kiss me on the night Bud died. We'd been drinking wine, garbage stuff we'd picked up on the way home. I thought it would help.

"This is a bad idea," I'd said.

“Why?” he asked, moving in closer. He gripped the top of my jeans and yanked, pulling me closer to him. I could feel the stubble on his face against my cheek.

“We’re friends,” I said.

“What if I want to be more than friends?” he asked.

“That sounds like a personal problem,” I answered. It was a favorite retort of his, but he didn’t seem to hear me. I tried to push his hand away, but I didn’t try hard. I liked the feeling of being close to him more than I thought I would.

“I want you,” he said, murmuring his words, letting them draw together. He tried kissing me again and I let him.

“We shouldn’t do this,” I said when the kiss broke.

“You need to give me a good reason, because this feels like it should definitely happen.”

“You know I don’t sleep with men who I outweigh by more than thirty pounds,” I said. It was generally true. I had established the rule in college and I thought it was a good one.

“It’s all in your tits anyway. I don’t have a problem with that.”

“That’s romantic,” I said, but I stopped trying to push him off of me.

“Isn’t it?” he said.

While Renee and Jackson, her “honey,” as she referred to him, exchanged vows, I zoned out. I imagined myself standing at the altar in Renee’s wedding dress, with its perfect little beading all over the skirt and the careful buttons up the curved back and the scooped neckline trimmed with lace. Not a dress I’d pick for myself, but it was the best I could do at the moment. I had to squint to picture someone standing in Jackson’s place. I saw my first boyfriend, Mike

Zeke, still thirteen, still with the bowl cut and chin zits, holding a skateboard and an overloaded backpack. He tasted like chicken nuggets and Mountain Dew, with his syrupy sweet saliva.

That wouldn't work. I imagined Nathaniel, my first love, who I lost my virginity to and was sure I was going to marry right out of high school. He broke up with me for my friend, Stephanie, when word got out that she was easy, and she was, but not so easy that she fell for that. He didn't think it through and broke up with me before finding out if she was even interested in him. We egged his parents' house on a school night and wore gardening gloves so no one would find our fingerprints on the broken eggshells. I didn't bother picturing the guy who came after Nathaniel, Dean, who sent me haikus and told me in an email that I was his "sweatheart," or the one who came after him, Rick the Dick, who had earned his nickname in more than one way.

I thought about Bryce, who I met in college algebra, which we both hated. He looked like a young Bob Dylan and carried an empty guitar case instead of a backpack around campus. We drank cheap red wine mixed with Sprite in my dorm room when my roommate was out for the night. He always wanted to have sex with the lights on and he liked Frank Sinatra movies and asked me to only wear black underwear. We had a good thing until one night he whispered into my hair that I needed to start calling him Ziggy Stardust. When I laughed he got up and left. I never heard from him again.

I didn't picture Russ up there at the altar with me because it would be useless. Our thing had been short-lived. It happened a few more times after the first, then he casually told me that a girl he worked with had been bringing him lunch on her days off and he thought he was going to go for it. He didn't get it when I kicked him out; we didn't talk for several years. I sent him a Christmas card on a whim after a break-up with a cross-country cyclist who ate half a jar of

peanut butter for breakfast every morning and insisted on calling me Mel, no matter how many times I told him to cut it out. Doing things on whims, my father said, was something I got from his cousin, Sarah, who had married a lawyer she met during her divorce from her second husband.

The ceremony itself and the reception were better than some I'd been to. Renee looked happy. Our uncle caught me in a conversation by the bar to tell me that Renee got her glow from her mother, who had also been happy at her own wedding thirty-five years ago, he remembered.

"Some wedding, eh?" my father said to me, as he watched people move to the dance floor for a slow number.

"It's great," I said, and shoveled salad into my mouth.

"Do you want to dance?" he asked. There was a hint of hope in his face.

"Maybe in a bit," I said. I took a roll and hated Renee for a minute for moving me to a table with my parents when Russ backed out of going with me.

My father gets his timidity from his own father, who wasn't much of a talker, according to his mother, who is as brash as they come. She got that from her great-grandmother, who once sat in a lawn chair outside of her house completely topless when she suspected her husband had cheated on her with the big-breasted hairdresser who ran the salon in town.

I liked to look back on things I had accomplished after breakups in the past. I passed college algebra with an A after Ziggy Stardust and I broke it off and he stopped showing up to class. I took some great pictures of a flock of ink-black birds on a highway wire with my cell

phone camera after a guy named Ivan stopped calling me after eight great dates, and one night of even better sex, and I sold them to a local weekly paper for the nature section. I adopted a yellow lab named Joy from the Humane Society when Russ and I stopped talking all those years ago. Joy weighed 102 pounds and her tongue constantly hung out of the side of her mouth. She could catch birds midair according to the woman at the shelter who took my \$40 and gave me her papers and little metal tag with the date of her last rabies vaccination. Joy peed in six different places in my apartment the first night I had her. I spent the whole next day talking to her and trying to explain that it would be better for the both of us if she just went outside, instead of on the couch or in the kitchen or next to my bed. She didn't pee in the house anymore after that. It was an accomplishment for both of us.

The music got louder and the wedding got drunker. I don't know how I ended up in the men's bathroom with a groomsman, but my father's Uncle Jake walked in on us while "Love Shack" blasted through the deejay's speakers.

"You got guts like your Great Aunt March, you know that," he shouted over the water and air hand dryer while the groomsman and I tried to button back up behind the unlocked door in the stall we were stuffed in together. "My mother. She was real handsy too."

"He's so old he probably won't remember in fifteen minutes," I whispered to the groomsman, but I said it for myself. He looked at me with what could either be described as mild interest or mild insanity, and took a sip of his beer, which had been resting on top of the toilet paper holder. He stopped my hands from trying to zip my dress back up and led one back to the front of his pants.

No one appeared to notice that we were gone. Uncle Jake was sitting on the smokers' porch at the reception hall in a white rocking chair, waiting for his pipe to be lit. Little second cousins, all under 10, chased a moth that had been unlucky enough to have gotten itself trapped in the screened patio. I couldn't remember which cousins belonged to whom; they all looked alike to me. The groomsman asked me if I wanted a drink and disappeared into the crowd before I was sure if I answered or not.

Joy had been good while I was gone. No accidents. She wagged her tail so hard when I opened the door, her body wagged with it, like one giant tail. I hooked her new magenta leash to her matching collar, impulse purchases I picked up at Petsmart, along with self-feeding bowls, a rawhide bone, and a bag of pigs' ears, which the kid working the dog section told me she would love. He was right. There were chewed-up pigs' ears in every room in the place.

Joy and I walked around the block twice, then headed to Russ'. My friend Gretchen, the one who has the great Home Depot "How We Met" story, says I shouldn't bother with him anymore now, that I never should have sent him that Christmas card or reconnected in the first place.

"You'll never meet your husband if you're always tied up with some guy you used to be in love with," she says.

"I was never in love with Russ," I tell her and she rolls her eyes.

My friend, Lynette, laughs when I tell her about Gretchen's warnings and says, "Bitch, please, we've all been there and she's not one to talk." Lynette thinks people get too hung up on relationships. She likes to be dating two or three guys at one time and only falls for the ones

who don't fall for her. Once, I asked her if she's ever really cared about someone. She said "Bitch, don't get me started. You get attached to one and it's a domino effect. They'll make your head explode."

When I told Russ about that conversation with Lynette he considered it for a few moments, with more thought than I ever saw him put into anything, then he said, "I think it's true. That's what families do to each other. Friends do it. That's what men and women do to each other. You will make our heads explode. We will make your head explode. It makes sense, I think."

I knocked on Russ' door and waited a requisite thirty seconds before walking in. He was stretched out on the couch completely naked. A brown bottle left a ring on his coffee table and the label had been peeled off. A nervous habit of his. Once, a long time ago, I asked him where he got that habit from and he looked at me like I was crazy.

"Not everything can be explained by family, Melanie," he said.

"Some things can. I hope. If they can't, then I only have myself to blame for the way I am," I answered.

"There's nothing wrong with the way you are," he'd said.

Joy barked at the sight of him, her big pink tongue lolling out of the right side of her mouth, and she jumped on the couch next to him, all 102 pounds of her landing on his naked body.

"Hey, Joy," he said and scratched her behind the ears while struggling to sit up.

"You could get dressed," I said.

“Why? You’ve seen it,” he said, wiggling his eyebrows, but still looking at Joy; “You could get undressed and then we’d be even.”

“What are you watching?” I asked, and pushed his feet off the couch to make room for myself.

“I’ve been channel flipping. There’s shit on right now.”

“You could have come to a wedding with me instead of sitting on your ass watching TV,” I said.

“Oh yeah, how did that go?” He moved Joy off of his lap and went to the kitchen, returning with another bottle of beer for himself and a bottle of water for me.

“It was okay. How do you know I don’t want a beer?”

“You probably don’t need one, you look pretty wrecked,” he said. He opened his beer with his arm and took a long gulp. I could hear it. I watched his Adam’s apple move with the gulp and the hair on the back of my neck prickled.

“I had bathroom sex with a groomsman,” I told him. I looked at Joy when I said it. She was taking up most of the couch, leaving a small part of the left end for Russ and a smaller part of the right for me. He rubbed her belly and laughed.

“I bet you did. How was that?”

“Kind of gross.”

He shook his head, laughed again, and took another gulp.

“Sorry I missed it.”

“You could have been there.”

“You could have just videotaped it for me.”

“I meant you could have just come to the wedding with me so I wouldn’t have been alone and in the position to have gross bathroom sex with a groomsman.” I ignored the water he had brought me and went to the kitchen to get myself a beer. I rummaged around in the kitchen drawers looking for a bottle opener and sat down on the bit of couch Joy was allowing me.

“I would have opened that for you,” he said.

“That’s okay,” I said, keeping my eyes on the TV. “You really should put some clothes on.”

“I’ll put clothes on if I feel like it and I don’t,” he said. We were quiet for a few minutes, and then I reached for Joy’s leash.

“What are you doing?” he said.

“I’m going to go home. I’m tired and I should probably shower.”

“Are you mad or something?”

“Maybe.”

Russ rolled his eyes and stopped petting Joy, who opened her eyes and nudged his hand with her snout, insistent, demanding. He started rubbing under her chin again, with eyes focused on me. I looked at the TV.

“You’re mad that I didn’t go to your cousin’s wedding with you? Seriously?”

I kept my eyes on the TV and thought about it. Russ and I had known each other for well over ten years, and we had been friends for about six of those years, considering the four we didn’t speak. We hadn’t slept together since the rekindling of our friendship as prompted by that stupid little Christmas card that I bought on a whim. I picked it up because it reminded me of

him, momentarily forgetting how much I had cried when he told me about the girl at work so casually, as if nothing had happened between us, as if he hadn't noticed the change in me afterwards and how quickly and how hard I had fallen for him. It surprised me, but I felt like it shouldn't have surprised him. The Christmas card showed a cartoon of a snowman angry at a dog that was using it as a fire hydrant. A yellow puddle stained the snowman's base and the snowman's eyebrows knitted together in a bent black line, his coal mouth turned down in a frown and his carrot nose crooked on his angry face. The momentary lapse in memory surprised me when my heart remembered that it had been four years since I had talked to Russ. I decided to buy it anyway and let it sit on my kitchen table unsigned for three weeks. I sent it on December 29th with the electric bill payment.

He called me a few days after New Year's, and we met for coffee. He acted as if nothing had ever happened. He picked up right where we left off, and when I asked him about the girl he'd given me up for, he looked confused. He couldn't even remember her name.

"Oh her? I don't know, we went out a few times and that was it. I think she got a job at a Friday's or something after that."

We talked for several hours. I told him about Joy and he said he'd like to meet her sometime. I told him I drank tea now and he laughed. He told me about a girl he was dating, which didn't pan out. We'd fallen back into each other easily. He tried, once, to make a move and I pushed him away, saying it was what I should have done the first time around. We were friends and it was better that way.

"You should have come," I said.

“Why? Because it’s what you wanted, even though I told you I wasn’t interested?”

“Yes.”

“You’re being crazy.”

“I hate it when you say that,” I said. I hadn’t let go of the leash, but I sat back down. I looked at Russ and his nakedness. *There was a time, I thought, that being naked with me did something for him.*

“I only say it because it’s true. You’re being crazy and you’re making me crazy. We’re not a couple, Melanie.”

I stood back up and clipped the leash to Joy’s collar. She jumped off the couch, ready to rejoin the night air. I stood and looked at Russ, who was also standing, naked. I felt like I was naked.

“I know we’re not a couple, Russ. I never said we were.”

“Well, you’re sure acting like you expect me to do things with you that a boyfriend would do.”

“I don’t expect anything of you. I know better than that.”

He rolled his eyes again and rubbed his temples. His penis jiggled a little bit when he shifted his weight from one foot to another. I wished he had put some clothes on when I had asked.

“I don’t know what you want me to do, Melanie. If you want to go, just go and tell me when you’re over this. I didn’t force you to fuck a groomsman at your cousin’s wedding and you told me it was fine that I wasn’t going.”

“Well, it wasn’t.”

“What do you want me to do?” he asked.

I thought about it for a minute. I hadn’t particularly cared when he told me he wasn’t interested in going to the wedding and I hadn’t really thought about it while I was there.

“What do you want, Melanie?” he asked.

I moved to answer, but Joy, who had grown impatient with all the standing around, interrupted me. She nosed between Russ’ legs with her tongue out. He jumped back with a yelp.

Joy was surprised and barked at him then turned in a circle and lay down with her head resting on her paws. Defeated.

Russ looked from her to me and laughed. I laughed too.

“I told you to put some fucking shorts on,” I said. “You never listen to me.”

“I don’t know if I ever will,” he said and walked to his bedroom. He came back with shorts on and sat down on the couch. I took the leash off of Joy and sat down next to Russ. He put an arm around me and I leaned my head on his shoulder.

“It’ll never work,” he said.

“I know,” I said.

“You know how we tend to be.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I do.”

APPENDIX A: WRITING LIFE

Over lunch with a friend, I self-indulged in telling my worst broken heart story to date—the one that left me raw and senseless for months, one that removed what I’d grown to think of as a constant force in my life, one that still smarts when I let myself think about it or talk about it. She listened intently, taking prim bites of her pulled pork sandwich and baked beans while I held a fork over my naked salad and blathered, trying desperately not to miss any of the details. She reacted accordingly with facial expressions and exclamations of “Asshole!” when appropriate. When I finished the story and stopped for a breath, she considered the whole thing, then said, “It’s a good thing that happened though, isn’t it? Since you have that thesis to finish?”

I understood, without needing an explanation, that she didn’t mean it was good that I suddenly had all this free time on my hands to work on my writing, but that I had this cathartic, visceral experience suddenly available from which to ignite—or reignite, as the case happened to be—my creativity. The truth is that it had long been stifled under the weight of false constants—an unstimulating job, a non-relationship, and forty pounds I tried hard to ignore. Without my permission, I was let go from the job, then another, and the relationship. The forty pounds held on.

I had to take stock of my life and focus on what I did have, rather than what I did not have. I had to look at the real constants; parents who (nutty as they are) have supported every decision I’ve ever made; fiercely loyal friends who don’t think twice about standing up for me; the ability to support myself, by my own determination.

And I have these stories.

This collection ended up being exactly what I needed, a place full of fictionalized realities, where I could put my observations, reactions, and anxieties into compartments, where I could write constants and evolution in relationships, whether romantic, familial, or friendship-driven. I've long known that I had it in me to write, but it took creating this collection to figure out what kind of writer I wanted to be. During this process, I discovered that the stories I really loved and felt satisfied reading—and writing—were not what I consider relationship stories, but human stories; stories about insecurities, miscommunications, disappointments, and the necessity of moving on.

My mother is a nurse and forever a caretaker. She encouraged and indulged my love of books by rewarding me with them at the end of grocery shopping trips when I was a kid. She labeled every piece of furniture in our house with actual adhesive-backed white labels, the kind people use on file folders to organize their lives, to teach me how to read. Some of those labels stuck so well they never came off. There are exclamations of “Dresser” and “Toy Box” identifying my mother's old, dilapidated furniture to this day.

Because my mother worked full time and was raising my younger brother and me by herself, I was frequently alone. To stay occupied, I wrote stories and I read books. I lovingly handcrafted “newspapers” for my mother to read when she got home from work, as if she didn't have enough on her plate. I was introverted and anxious—about everything. I would fret in a way that only a kid can fret, about asinine things, like hurting my stuffed animals' feelings if I didn't give one enough attention. I'd get out of bed in the middle of the night to organize my books by the colors of the spines. I mostly worried about doing things wrong and making my

mother's life harder than I knew it already was, so I busied myself with reading. I knew it pleased her that I loved to read and that I was so readily "good." I had a story for everything and created wild realities in my head on my walks home from school. When no one was around to listen to my stories, I'd tell them to the family dog.

As I got older, I grew out of my shyness and my anxiety, but I never grew out of reading or storytelling. My best friend's mother, a school media specialist, loaded me up with books every time I visited their house. At thirteen I was simultaneously reading Judy Blume and J.D. Salinger—and appreciating both for what they could do. At the same time, I struggled with my weight and found that by being funny, I could detract from it, at least a little. The funnier I was, the less I felt like my weight mattered to people.

I had to get really funny.

In my last year of high school I was encouraged by my AP English teacher to forget Dostoevsky and to read Kurt Vonnegut—"He'll suit that sense of humor you've got," she said, and she was right. I read *Slaughter-house Five* and *Breakfast of Champions* hungrily. I loved the cynicism, the one-liners, and observations about people, greed, and the Universe. I especially loved the importance he placed on the power of laughter over despair—much like David Sedaris, who was quickly emerging as another favorite as well.

I entered college knowing that I wanted to write, but having no idea what I was actually capable of creating; until then, my writing consisted of youthful efforts and school projects. I had my first writing workshop in 2005, while in the process of losing drastic amount of weight and was feeling unusually confident—ever a procrastinator, I slapped together a story that ended with a smarmy character faced with no choice but to just get on with it. It was a revenge story

based on a guy who had slighted me because of, by his own admission, my weight. The story was successful in workshop, touted as one of the best the class had seen, which is funny to look back on now. Looking at that story compared to the ones in this collection, I see clear evolution, and realize that although my craft has improved, my first instinct was to write a simply human story about disappointment and acceptance and that I haven't strayed far from that gut feeling.

During the creation of this thesis, I've changed tremendously, physically and personally, but I've also kept constants. My reading tastes, ever in a state of evolution, shifted to writers like Antonia Nelson, Louise Erdrich, and Pam Houston, whose writing assured me that writing female characters who make mistakes, have sex, swear, and are sometimes unforgiving, aren't necessarily weak, but realistic and cathartic. I see them in "How We Tend to Be," "Fish Don't Have Feelings," and "Oh, The Grandiosity!" At the same time, Sedaris and Vonnegut have remained constants, following and influencing me through the process, reminding me that it's just as well to laugh instead of cry—"Matchbook Baby" is the oldest story in this collection, and though it has undergone many revisions and Amos has changed a bit, the original image—a son burning his mother's coffin in the name of love, respect, and hilarity—has remained the same. "Opal" is another one I've kept constant; I've always felt the closest to Opal, perhaps because I feel so sorry for how things turned out for her and because I admire her strength.

Strength—particularly the strength of female friendships is a theme I find emerging and remerging as a constant in my writing, and it is a direct result of the strong friendships I've nurtured through the process, and the examination of the ones I've had to move on from. Music

and the comfort and nonjudgmental nature of animals are other constants I see when I take it all in.

I'm forever fascinated by people's eccentricities and self-centeredness; I'm desperate to understand why people act the way they do. As a non-traditional graduate student, I've spent my entire college education also being employed full-time, allowed to read and write only on weekends, lunch breaks, and late into the evenings. I often describe myself as unobservant because my perpetual busy schedule leaves me little time to absorb nonessentials, but the truth is that I'm terribly observant of things—and people—that I care about. Stories like “January-December” “The World’s Smallest Horse, and “The Last Bite” explore traits and themes that fascinate me—selfishness, greed, and how capable women are of utterly despising each other. I've always regretted my inability to understand human psyche on a scientific level, but I'm grateful for my ability to explore it artistically, through writing.

In completing this collection, I'm suddenly faced with losing another constant—my status as a working student, which is how I've long identified myself. I've been in school for twenty years, with few breaks in between. I don't know what it is to not fill my free time with schoolwork, to read and write just for me, and not for a deadline. I realize, however, as a direct result of writing these stories, that being out of school won't take away books, friends, fascinations, or what I've always been—a storyteller.

Those will remain constant.

APPENDIX B: BOOK LIST

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